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Answering the Call Through an Inquiry Circle: English Educators Embark on a Journey
to Become Antiracist

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Upper Montclair, NJ

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Dissertation Chair: Dr. Monica Taylor

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY
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We hereby approve the Dissertation
**Answering the Call Through an Inquiry Circle:
English Educators Embark on a Journey to Become Antiracist**

of

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Abstract

This study examines a group of four English educators, two women of color and two white women, who self-identified as teachers for social justice as they formed a teacher inquiry group, called a teacher inquiry circle, as they attempt to become antiracist. The purpose of the inquiry circle was to answer the call to action for more equitable racially just schools that permeated the nation during the Covid-19 pandemic and after the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020. To conduct the study a feminist practitioner action research methodology was used, and a racial literacy framework was applied to examine the lived experiences of the members of the teacher inquiry circle who were working in a variety of contexts as they embarked on their journey to becoming antiracist. Over the course of seven months these English teachers engaged in a collaborative dialogic group that used shared inquiry and critical storytelling and attempted to take action against the structures and systems that perpetuate race-based inequities. The research found that although challenging, difficult, and uncomfortable, small antiracist actions can be achieved when a group of English teachers committed to becoming antiracist worked across communities and contexts, racial and geographical, to form a community of solidarity.

Keywords: antiracism, collaborative teacher inquiry, critical storytelling, English educators, equity, feminist practitioner action research, teacher identity, racial literacy, social justice, teacher inquiry circle

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband Kevin, my true companion and partner in all things.

I am so blessed that I get to share this crazy life with you. I love you so much.

Chapter 1: Introduction

“The opposite of racist isn’t ‘not racist.’ It is ‘anti-racist.’” (Kendi, 2019, p. 9)

The events of the summer of 2020 were a major catalyst for questioning my teaching practices and my actions to further social justice in my classroom and in my life. As a feminist pedagogue I cannot separate how I live, how and what I teach, or how I see the world from my feminist world view (Hanisch, 2006; McCusker, 2017; Ohito, 2019). Additionally, as a doctoral candidate in a program that centers social justice, I have been grappling for years with ways to navigate around curriculum that values knowledge and cultural norms benefiting some students while excluding others. During the summer of 2020, within an intense political and social climate and amid a pandemic, I began to question if what I had been doing in my classroom was enough.

After the murder of George Floyd, when activists took to the streets, I was compelled to join them. As I read the signs “white silence is violence” and “white silence = white consent” I was proud that I had not remained silent and that I had come out in support, but as I walked through the streets in New Brunswick and East Orange, New Jersey and listened to the speakers I had to wonder, was what I was doing enough? Much of what I was reading, learning, and hearing during this period suggested to me that the answer was an emphatic no. For example, Tre Johnson’s *Washington Post* article (2020), “When Black People Are in Pain, White People Just Join Book Clubs,” struck a nerve. What would happen after the protests died down (as protests inevitably do)? Would I go back to life as usual? Could I go back to life as usual? In the article Johnson (2020) wrote:

The right acknowledgment of Black justice, humanity, freedom and happiness won’t be found in your book clubs, protest signs, chalk talks or organizational statements. It will

be found in your earnest willingness to dismantle systems that stand in our way—be they at your job, in your social network, your neighborhood associations, your family or your home. (para. 10)

For me, “at your job” was at the public high school where I teach. I wanted to answer the call to action in a more meaningful way, but I still questioned, beyond marching in a protest or joining a book club, what could I do? As a teacher, I knew that I wanted to be and could be an ally or better yet a coconspirator, one who would not just offer sympathy and stand by or engage in antiracism to be “performative or self-glorifying” but one who takes action (Love, 2019, p. 117). While I agreed with Johnson’s (2020) assessment of book clubs, I did continue to read about antiracism. I believed I needed to educate myself first and then decide on the action to take. As an English teacher reading was something I could do but beyond reading, an action I could and wanted to take was an examination of my own teaching practice.

The summer ended, the new school year began, and the question of what to do continued to nag me and remained at the forefront of my thinking. I knew with hashtags like #curriculumsowhite trending (Picower, 2021), and Black scholars describing schools as places where “we cannot always trust authority figures to act humanely toward our children” (Stevenson, 2018, para. 2) that antiracist work in schools was imperative. I vowed to examine my teaching practice and to take some kind of action.

I was not alone in my desire to take action. Winn (2018) wrote, “A national spotlight on racial disparities in school discipline policies and practices in the era of #BlackLivesMatter has demonstrated that a plan of action is needed” (p. 260). This national spotlight prompted changes within the district and in the building where I teach. In response to the protests of the previous summer and national calls for equity, my school district created a new position and hired a

supervisor of Diversity and Equity, the district required each individual school in the district to form a School Equity Team (SET), and the district adopted a district wide Antiracism pledge. As evidence of the district's commitment to change, copies of the Antiracism pledge were signed by faculty and students and were posted on classroom doors throughout the building. These were tremendously promising actions, but they also prompted me to ask more questions: What did these district and school wide actions mean for me as an English educator? What did they mean for my practice? Would these initiatives bring about change? While encouraged by the district's response, I was still faced with the daunting question, what could I, a white woman teacher of English do? Although I was unsure of the exact answer, I knew that attention to my teaching practice and a focus on antiracist education were necessary and an apt place to begin.

Throughout that time, I was inspired by all that I had seen as protesters hit the streets and all that I had read in and outside of my doctoral classes, but it was my colleagues in the English department that confirmed for me the importance and necessity of doing antiracist and other social justice work collaboratively and in English classrooms specifically. During the spring of 2021 we were finally back at school. The building was mostly empty, classes ranged from one to a maximum of six students who attended school in person. Due to our modified hybrid schedule, new routines were formed. Each morning at the crossroads of Room 200 and Room 242 a circle of teachers formed. While in past years we would have been in front of our respective doors and doing morning crowd control, we found the ten-minute luxury of easing into the day we never had before. In the midst of small talk and joking, each morning the conversations inevitably (or maybe not) turned to frustrations with our pandemic influenced classrooms, questions about the changing nature of our practice, and concerns for the mental health and wellbeing of our

students. We wondered whether school would ever get back to so-called normal and asked ourselves whether we wanted it to go back to those supposed “good old days.”

We also wondered what the calls for action from the outside, including the recently adopted bill NJ S1569 (2019) that required schools to provide instruction on the history and accomplishments of persons with disabilities and the LGBTQ+ community, and these new school initiatives regarding race within our district, might mean for our English classrooms and for our own practices. We joked that we should receive professional development hours for our time in our circle in the hallway. It was in these moments that I realized the powerful ways teachers, particularly teachers of English, like us, could use their collective questioning and begin to search for answers together. These impromptu morning chats were proving to be fruitful and beneficial as we navigated through the changing landscape of our school, the social unrest, and pandemic influenced world around us, collectively as well as individually. During this time, I also began to wonder how other English teachers in other schools and even other districts were managing in these challenging times and I questioned why opportunities to collaborate were a novelty instead of a necessity.

The pandemic, the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent protests, and calls for action left me with a barrage of questions that were difficult to answer. These questions solidified my desire to answer the call to action by becoming an antiracist English teacher. This dissertation study, which was born out of my personal questioning, is purposefully presented using a personal and narrative approach to the research and myself as a feminist researcher (Fine, 2018; Hankins, 1998; Leavy & Harris, 2019) throughout all of the chapters. In this first chapter, I present the history and current sociopolitical climate, describe the pushback occurring due to calls for action and change, the statement of the purpose, and my research questions. In chapter

2, I explain my use of racial literacy as a theoretical framework, which is followed by a literature review that examines research pertaining to antiracist education in English classrooms. In chapter 3, I present my methodology, feminist practitioner action research. I identify the context of the study which was conducted in New Jersey, and I give the specific school contexts of each participant. I describe my participants who I refer to as collaborators, a group of English teachers who came together as complete strangers who shared a common goal of becoming antiracist, and I discuss my methods for gathering and analyzing data. I also discuss the trustworthiness of the study. In chapter 4, I present my findings of the seven month study of English teachers in a teacher inquiry circle, and in chapter 5, I summarize those findings, state my conclusions, and identify implications for English teachers, school administrators, teacher education, and education research.

The History and Current Sociopolitical Climate

In 2019 de los Rios et al. (2019) described: “Fervent white nationalism, religious and linguistic intolerance, and anti-immigrant and racist discourses characterize our current socio-political landscape” (p. 364). As the post global pandemic years progress this landscape has become increasingly stark and difficult to ignore. As a feminist and an educator who wants to contribute to a just and equitable society, when confronted with the toxic partisan political climate, rampant conspiracy theories, and push back against antiracist education practices including the banning of books by and about people of color, it would also be easy to blame the current state of affairs on politicians or on political parties. However, it is important to acknowledge that the current socio-political climate albeit heightened only serves as a reminder that a post-race America is a myth and the events of 2020 just revealed in greater focus the already embedded systematic racism in schools and society (Dumas, 2016; Picower, 2021;

Rohrer, 2018). Just as I had been personally questioning and attempting to educate myself after I witnessed the increased social unrest, so were many others. In 2020 the internet was flooded with both academic and nonacademic resources for people wishing to become antiracist. Beyond the growing number of people I knew who were reading Kendi's *How to be an Antiracist* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Beyond the World and Me*, a cursory search of the internet provided anyone who had a desire to know more with culled lists of antiracist resources, books, articles, podcasts, interviews, twitter feeds, blogs, videos, documentaries, and movies. The sheer quantity of resources was overwhelming.

The national discourse around antiracism was seeping into all areas of society and education was a high priority area for change. In fact, according to the blog, *Teaching Today*, in 2020, antiracism was already predicted to be a top education buzzword for 2021 (Edpuzzle, 2020). But antiracism should not be trivialized as a buzzword or a fashionable trend (Givens, 2021). Antiracist work is not new, particularly for Black scholars who have continuously focused on racism and how it impacts the lives of the black community and students of color (Givens, 2021). Johnson (2020) called out white people attempting to do antiracist work, he reminded them that people are suffering and just reading is not enough. Dumas (2016) asked a poignant question, “[We] all might explore together what it means to educate a group of people who were never meant to be educated and, in fact, were never meant to be, to exist as humans” (p. 17). While the outrage of the summer of 2020 served as a catalyst bringing antiracism to the national consciousness, antiracism has a long history in the United States (Givens, 2021; Love, 2019; Ohito, 2019) and the latest push for antiracism in the country is just the most current iteration of the persistent history of antiracist teachers and teaching.

Givens (2021) argued that advocates for antiracist teaching are remiss if they do not attend to the significant history of antiracist teaching in this country. Givens (2021) further contended that antiracist educators have been working against white supremacy and racism since the time of slavery using what he calls “fugitive pedagogy” (para. 9). Fugitive pedagogy which for example, sought to teach reading in secret and under the threat of death during slavery and through the Jim Crow era, continued into the “long-standing tradition of antiracist teaching pioneered by Black educators in the 19th century” (para. 3). In the 20th century, thinkers like bell hooks (1994) with *Teaching to Transgress* and Toni Morrison’s (1992) examination of whiteness in *Playing in the Dark* in the 1990s identified literature and teaching as important places to examine antiblackness, whiteness, and racism. In the time since Black scholars like Toni Morrison (1992), W. E. B. Dubois (1903), and James Baldwin (1963) began the discussion of whiteness, white scholars have now joined in the conversation with critical whiteness studies and white teacher identity (Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Lynch, 2018; Tanner, 2019; Tanner & Berchini, 2017). In addition to teachers and academics, policy and lawmakers have turned their attention to antiracism at various times throughout this country’s history.

Perhaps the most momentous change was the desegregation of schools prompted by *Brown v Board of Education* in 1954. Although an important step toward equality, many of the issues of race in schools the decision hoped to erase are still and maybe even more prevalent today (Guinier, 2004). An understanding of the unintended and long reaching consequences of *Brown v. Board of Education* for Black communities and all students were important for this study as these consequences can be particularly negative for students of color (Horsford, 2019). Unfortunately, while laws and policies have attempted to counter racism by making blatant acts of racism and discrimination illegal and praise multiculturalism and justice for all, in schools the

lives of many students who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) remain a struggle (Dumas, 2016; Horsford, 2019; Johnson, 2018).

A full history of antiracist teaching is beyond the scope of this study and what I have provided here is far from exhaustive, but the purpose of these historical acknowledgements is to highlight the ongoing nature of the problem of race(ism) in our schools. Antiblackness, particularly, manifests itself in the disproportionate surveillance, the severity and frequency of discipline, and the lack of acknowledgement of the achievements of people of color for students of color (Dumas, 2016; Horsford, 2019). Scholars studying racism in K–12 schools showed the problem of racism in our schools as extended, far reaching, and unacceptable (Dumas, 2016; Dunn & Love, 2020; Horsford, 2019; Picower, 2021). Horsford (2019), for example, offered, “And many years later, as a Black mother of three children . . . I continue to wrestle with what constitutes the best type of learning environment for young people in a society that does not value their intellect, culture, or humanity” (p. 21). Today antiracist teachers will need to continue the legacy of activism and fight for the survival of their students of color (Love, 2019) because, as in the past, this fight for educational equity will not progress forward without resistance and action. All teachers today need to accept that working against racism is the responsibility of every one of us (Love, 2019; Picower, 2021; Wetzel, 2020) and carry on the work of the brave abolitionist educators of the past.

Action Leads to Change and More Pushback

In response to the surge in awareness which began during the summer of 2020, and the desire to combat issues of racial inequities and racism including those issues happening in schools, there has been an equally powerful surge in pushback from parents and politicians. Politicians and media coverage continually misrepresent antiracism as a new fight or frame it as

unnecessary or damaging. Givens (2021) described, “A wave of legislative campaigns” where “just under 30 states have passed or proposed legislation to restrict how educators can teach about race and power in schools” (para. 2). These attempts to restrict teachers and curricula in schools from addressing race, racism, and white privilege use words like “indoctrination” and “Un-American” to paint antiracism as a threat rather than a means to work toward a solution to systematic racism or to ensure equity for all students in all classrooms.

Along with calls for bans on discussing race, books by and about people of color and the LGBTQIA+ community have come under fire in many communities around the country (Bellamy-Walker, 2022). These bans directly contradict long running efforts to make books and curriculum more inclusive. In 1990, Sims Bishop introduced her powerful metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Around the same time Nancy Larrick’s (1965) seminal piece, *The All-White World of Children’s Books* was published. These scholars highlighted the damaging impact of learning to read and learning about the world through books that only represented the dominant white Eurocentric middle class culture. Sims Bishop (2015) warned, “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (para. 4). Today the long, slow, ongoing battle for representation in books and in all parts of the curriculum is being jeopardized and this is happening at a time when the population of the United States is becoming more diverse and changing more rapidly (Holme et al., 2013; Lee, 2005). Holme et al. (2013), for example, identified: “Although suburbs have historically been homogeneous” meaning white and middle class, “in recent years they have undergone a rapid demographic transformation . . . As a result of these shifts, the suburbs now house more than half of all racial and ethnic groups, and a

growing proportion of low-income and linguistic minority families” (p. 3). In addition, the resegregation of neighborhoods and therefore schools and the gentrification of urban areas have displaced and shifted school populations (Dumas, 2016). The rapid change in demographics and geographies underscore the urgency to disrupt the status quo in classrooms and make changes that benefit all students now.

These contentious times require educators from all disciplines and at all levels to take an activist stance (de los Rios et al., 2019; Oyler, 2017; Picower, 2021). An activist stance requires teachers to “position teaching as an activist profession” whereby teachers advocate for students and themselves and engage in resistance work by defending students’ rights to a quality education (Oyler, 2017, p. 31). For teachers, collaborative teacher inquiry is an effective way to support teachers in developing a more activist orientation (Simon, 2015; Simon & Campano, 2013). Oyler (2017) encouraged teachers to become activists and form groups to do social justice work when she stated, “The collaborations and partnerships needed for a more holistic and justice oriented version of teaching and learning are best organized at the hyper-local level and are based on us deepening our knowledge of the people and their home communities that we serve” (p. 31). It could be argued that English teachers particularly need to step up (Falter et al., 2020). Tanner (2019) justified this call when he wrote, “The problem of whiteness lives and breathes in our English classrooms and the field of English education” (p. 194), showing that English classrooms are in need of being closely examined and a rich site for study. Most importantly, antiracist work throughout its history has strived for social transformation and justice (Givens, 2021; Love, 2019). The current sociopolitical climate makes it necessary that now more than ever the mission begun by abolitionist educators needs to be continued. Love (2019) warned, “White rage will counter and bring in reinforcements to maintain injustice” (p.

90). Instead of giving up hope in the face of pushback the inquiry circle of social justice oriented English teachers joined the “emerging trend of activist-oriented scholars reclaiming English” (de los Rios et al., 2019, p. 363) and took up the activist oriented work of becoming antiracist.

Statement of the Purpose

The informal conversations with my fellow English teachers out in the hallway, served as the genesis of the inquiry group that formed for this doctoral study. The purpose of the study was to use teacher inquiry, dialogic practices, and storytelling to examine how English teachers can work toward disrupting race-based inequities and can improve classroom practices to be more equitable and socially just. The ultimate goal of the teacher inquiry group was for its members to work toward becoming antiracist. I formed the teacher inquiry group with like-minded social justice oriented English teachers from a variety of individual contexts within New Jersey.

Borsheim-Black (2015), in her case study of a white teacher of English who applied antiracist practices to teaching literature, suggested: “Future research might continue to explore ways English teachers develop their own unique antiracist approaches in response to the racial dynamics of their own schools and communities” (p. 426). This was the work that the inquiry circle of English teachers strived to do. In this study, I documented the individual and collective action taking of the teacher inquiry group as we progressed alongside one another on the ongoing, nonlinear journey of becoming antiracist.

Antiracism is a broad term which, in its simplest definition, means to be against racism. In addition to a way of being or living, antiracism can be applied to specific subjects like education and used to battle against racism and discrimination. Within the context of this study, I borrowed the definition of antiracist education from Troyna and Carrington (1990) who described antiracist teaching as “a wide range of organizational, curricular and pedagogical

strategies which aim to promote racial equality and to eliminate attendant forms of discrimination and oppression, both individual and institutional” (p. 1) and for English teachers specifically, antiracist English teaching that “emphasizes and interrogates the inherent Eurocentric bias of the school curriculum, revises it to include texts that explicitly teach against racism, and trains students to take social action against injustice in their world” (Skerrett, 2008, p. 1815). This definition fit with the feminist pedagogy I already practiced and provided the foundation from which the inquiry group of English teachers worked. These definitions acknowledged that antiracist teaching practices are ways of taking action, they are varied, they work against both individual and institutional discrimination, they involve a challenge to existing curricula and pedagogies, and they are context specific (Skerrett, 2011, 2008). In studying diverse English teachers from different contexts, I bring to light the unique challenges of becoming antiracist that English teachers who identify as women of color and white women faced and I provided a fuller picture of antiracist English teaching practices (Borsheim-Black, 2015; Skerrett, 2008). To present this picture I conducted a feminist practitioner action research study that used a teacher inquiry circle as a vehicle to generate the stories, experiences, and questions of my English educator collaborators who like me wanted to take action and attempt to become antiracist teachers. The picture generated by documenting the journey of this group of individuals has implications beyond this small study. Love (2019) called for new ways of seeing education and encouraged “teachers taking back their schools, classroom by classroom, student by student” (p. 89) which highlighted the importance and power of small-scale commitments like this teacher inquiry circle to move toward greater systematic change in whatever ways were possible.

As English teachers, the teacher inquiry circle was in an advantageous but complex position to do transformative antiracist work in schools. Inherent in English curricula are the tools to teach students about injustice and help them find their voices. Winn (2018) discussed antiracist work in schools and explained, “I begin this line of inquiry with English teachers because of the powerful set of mediating tools they work with—literature, poetry, prose, plays, writing, speaking, discussion, and debate—that have the potential to address and disrupt inequality in classrooms, schools, and communities” (p. 249). I have always felt that way, that the English classroom is a liberatory place. It was in an English classroom where I found my own voice and consequently as an English teacher, I have implemented feminist pedagogical practices in the hope of promoting equity through student voice and choice (McCusker, 2017). However, I also came to realize that the field of language arts and English classrooms in general, due to issues such as its overly Eurocentric curricula (Skerrett, 2008) and strict adherence to standard or academic English (Baker-Bell, 2020), are inherently oppressive (de los Rios et al., 2019; Dunn & Love, 2020; Sarigianides & Banack, 2021; Tanner, 2019). Therefore, as English teachers, albeit at times unintentionally, we had the potential to reinforce these oppressions. De los Rios et al. (2019) cautioned, “ELA educators must also understand the historical contours of harm inflicted by our field” (p. 360) and challenged English teachers to move “beyond acknowledging ELA classrooms as sites of ongoing racialization” and to “recognize how these legacies continue to impact our classrooms and students” (p. 360). The formation of the inquiry circle of English teachers constituted that acknowledgement and the need to move forward toward action.

In my extensive reading and questioning as I prepared to take action, one resource that inspired me was a white paper by Falter et al. (2020), which issued a call to action for English

teachers specifically. The white paper confirmed what I was already thinking, high school English teachers and English classrooms in particular could prove to be powerful in the fight for more equitable education as well as rich places to study. Falter et al. (2020) posited that “this is work that is needed for *all* teachers and *all* students, whether your school has a predominantly white population or is quite diverse” (p. 1). Their focus on taking action really spoke to the feminist in me and helped me answer the question I had been grappling with for most of that year. In the face of racial injustices in schools, what could I do? Through this study I finally had the answer, I could answer the call and work toward becoming an antiracist English teacher, but who else was heeding the call? Who else was in the process of becoming? These questions prompted me to find other English teachers to join me on my antiracist journey. To guide the study of English teachers from varying contexts on a journey to becoming antiracist I used the following research question:

- How can a group of English teachers in an inquiry circle actively work to disrupt the structures, policies, institutions, and systems that act as barriers and preserve race-based inequities in their classrooms?
- What are the lived experiences of English teachers from a variety of contexts as they attempt to become antiracist teachers in the English classrooms where they teach through a teacher inquiry group?

These questions are underpinned with the understanding that high school English classrooms can both be a place of oppression and a place of liberation. Falter and Kerkhoff (2018) offered, “Through a critical reading of the world in the word, and vice versa, one is able to bring to light social injustices and inequities, such as racism, and the power of institutions, such as the police, [or schools] to enforce practices that oppress” (p. 260). The inquiry group of

English teachers shed this light within their own classrooms, curriculums, and practices and as Winn (2018) advised, we used the powerful tools of our subject to do so.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

My desire to study antiracist English teachers stemmed from the calls to action I received and the realization that what I was doing in my English classroom was not enough. To be antiracist is to be confronted with the reality that although “The origins of Indigenous displacement and chattel slavery are historical, the ripples of this history do not disappear” (Picower, 2021, p. 10). These ripples include the anti-Black violence the country witnessed and could no longer ignore and the oppressiveness of classrooms and curriculum for people of color. In response, I realized that I needed to add antiracism to the feminist pedagogy I was already practicing, and I needed to understand how to be antiracist in order to do so.

In my efforts to educate myself about antiracism and in preparation for this study, I read extensively on the topic of antiracist teaching in English classrooms. A review of the literature pertaining to antiracist English teachers and teaching identified English classrooms and English teachers as worthy and necessary subjects for studying antiracism and racial literacy emerged as a valuable way to frame this study. While my feminist worldview informs my epistemological beliefs and certainly informed the research methodology of this study, I believed this study also required a more specific and direct framing related to antiracist teaching. I chose to frame the study through a racial literacy lens not in lieu of a feminist framing as I cannot separate my work from my feminist ways of being, but to enhance my understanding of the lived experiences of English teachers becoming antiracist including myself. In this chapter I define and explain how I used racial literacy as a framework, and I present the themes and summarize the understandings gained from the literature.

Theoretical Framework

Racial literacy theory is a combination of literacy and antiracism and was an important foundation for the study of how English teachers can become antiracist educators. As the literature showed, a teacher's identity, what and how they teach, and their willingness to take action are crucial steps to becoming antiracist pedagogues. Therefore, I used racial literacy theory as a practical tool to provide the language and identify the practices necessary for the English teachers in the inquiry circle to engage in antiracist work in the English classrooms where they teach. Racial literacy was a framework whereby the collective but also the individual journeys of the English teachers in the inquiry group were better understood as we attempted to become antiracist.

Racial Literacy Defined

First and foremost, racial literacy is grounded in the belief that race is socially constructed (Colomer, 2019; de los Rios et al., 2019; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Singh, 2019; Vetter & Hungerford-Kressor, 2014). Guinier (2004), a legal scholar and educator, stated racial literacy allows for "Rethink[ing] race as an instrument of social, geographic and economic control of both whites and blacks" (p. 144) and she argued that "Racial literacy offers a more dynamic framework for understanding American racism" (p. 144). Rogers and Mosley (2006), in their study of literacy instruction that explicitly centered race, elaborated with three characteristics of racial literacy. They explained:

First, racial literacy defines racism as a structural problem rather than as an individual one. Second, racial literacy locates debates about public process, which are often cloaked in the subtext of race, within an explicitly democratic context that is forward looking. Third, the process dimension to racial literacy can be used to guide participatory problem solving. (p. 465)

These three characteristics informed my study in that I used a racial literacy framework: to examine racism as a structural problem in schools, to take action by centering race and incorporating antiracist teaching practices in an English classroom, and to engage in participatory problem solving within a teacher inquiry group. The critical nature of racial literacy made it a theoretical lens through which I was able to conduct feminist practitioner action research.

Building on Guinier's (2004) ideas about law and democracy, education researchers began applying a racial literacy framework to education (Rolón-Dow et al., 2021; Skerrett, 2011; Vetter & Hungerford-Kressor, 2014). Consequently, education scholars have described racial literacy as a lens, a theory, a skill (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Stevenson, 2018); a practice (Rolón-Dow et al., 2021; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Vetter & Hungerford-Kressor, 2014); and a curriculum (Neville, 2020a; Rolón-Dow et al., 2021). Regardless of the small differences between these definitions, there was agreement among educational theorists that the purpose of racial literacy is to bring about change. Change can come about through the ways individuals think and talk about race and racism, for as Picower (2021) contended, "racial literacy can transform deeply held racial beliefs of White teachers and how that impacts their curricular choices" (p. 62). Change can also come about as a push back on systemic racism in social institutions like schools. As Skerrett (2011) explained, "Racial literacy is an understanding of the powerful and complex ways in which race influences the social, economic, political, and educational experiences of individuals and groups" (p. 314). Ultimately, the hope was that using racial literacy would lead to the transformation of ways of thinking and teaching for members of the group and by extension for the students in their classrooms.

Ebarvia (2020) posited that if oppression is embedded in the system our response to it must become embedded as well. As such racial literacy was a way for the teacher inquiry group to center race and discussions of race at our meetings as well as a fitting framework to make sense of our lived experiences. As English teachers who collectively questioned themselves, our teaching practices, and the contexts where we teach, racial literacy helped to make sense of the journey(s) as we attempted to implement antiracist teaching practices in our classrooms.

Racial Literacy Can be Enacted

Racial literacy was framed as a tool, a skill, and a practice and therefore it can be enacted (Colomer, 2019; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Stevenson, 2018). For example, “racial literacy in English classrooms is the ability to read, discuss, and write about situations that involve race or racism” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021, p. 2) making becoming racially literate an action that can be taken which can bring about change. According to Sealey-Ruiz (2021), “A desired outcome of racial literacy in an outwardly racist society like the United States is for members of the dominant racial category to adopt an antiracist stance and for persons of color to resist a victim stance” (p. 2). This two-fold purpose requires an enactment by all members of society from their individual vantage points to bring about equity. Instead of putting the responsibility to fight racism on one group or another, racial literacy can and should be enacted by everyone (Skerrett, 2011). While there was no road map or set rules for enactment, the literature suggested some ways to practice racial literacy.

To engage in racial literacy the first step was an examination of self, and this self-examination was particularly necessary for teachers. Ebarvia (2021) contended, “As teachers, we must persistently ask ourselves how our own racialized, gendered, and other socialized identities affect how we choose texts, deliver instruction, and most importantly, engage with students” (p. 584). Armed with a greater understanding of self, teachers prepare themselves to enact racial

literacy by learning the ways and the language to discuss race in the classroom and purposefully practicing and using these skills (Rolón-Dow et al., 2021; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Stevenson, 2018). Instead of avoiding race, racial literacy acknowledges the social construction of racialized ways of thinking and attempts to offer more socially just literacy instruction to all students (Ebarvia, 2021). In this way racial literacy became a practical and effective tool for teachers to fight racism and oppression (Stevenson, 2018). In Colomer's (2019) study of Latinx teachers, she concluded that if educators did not have critical racial literacy skills they would be "unprepared to act as advocates or change agents" (p. 14). If racial literacy in schools can better prepare teachers to deliver more equitable and just instruction than without becoming racial literate teachers put their students at a disadvantage.

In a study of preservice teachers, Rolón-Dow et al. (2021) offered, "We aim to help teacher candidates develop a stance, vocabulary, and skills to understand and address the dynamics of race and racism in their schooling contexts" (p. 666). They further suggested teachers "apply race as a diagnostic tool to analyze and create curriculum and pedagogies from a race-conscious perspective" (p. 666). The authors found that even if the preservice teachers in their study understood the importance of students seeing themselves in the curriculum and acknowledged the problem of the curriculum's overall whiteness, they were still reluctant to actually transform the curriculum. Although the study revealed that knowledge did not necessarily bring about change, Rolón-Dow et al. (2021) warned that these results should not be a deterrent. Racial literacy is an ongoing and necessary process that takes time. Rolón-Dow et al. (2021) and Stevenson (2018) acknowledged other deterrents such as the social emotional well-being of teachers and teacher candidates who engage in the stress-inducing work of centering race. They recognized that as teachers learn to be racially literate, they need to pay attention to

their own emotional well-being and take care of their own emotions. However, this self-monitoring should not become an excuse or distract teachers from the larger issue of racial inequities faced by students in classrooms.

Racial Literacy for Students

In addition to being a tool for teachers, racial literacy can be a tool for students as well, giving them “The ability to read, recast, and resolve racially stressful situations” (Stevenson, 2018, para. 6) not only in schools but in their everyday lives. Racial literacy is crucial in schools where teachers are often unprepared to deal with racial tensions or discussions of race and students experience the brunt of the racism and inequality in classrooms and curriculum (Picower, 2021; Rolón-Dow et al., 2021). Students then can use racial literacy to understand and read a racial situation and resolve the situation in ways that “benefit their wellbeing” (Stevenson, 2018, para. 8). Furthermore “Students who have this skill can discuss the implications of race and American racism in constructive ways” (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021, p. 2), making racial literacy a powerful tool in the hands of students.

Preparing students to understand and resolve racial situations is of the utmost importance, that being said, Colomer (2019) suggested it is a racially literate teacher who can work through the discomfort of discussing race(ism), who can make more equitable curricular choices, and who can advocate for their students. Rogers and Mosely (2006) attested, “Literacy instruction in schools must address race, racism, and antiracism in an educative manner . . .” (p. 465) which gives English teachers a prime role in becoming more racially literate and bringing racial literacy and antiracism into classrooms. Teachers are at the forefront of initiatives to implement antiracist practices in schools and what is taught and how it is taught has an impact on students that cannot be ignored, therefore teachers were the focus of this study.

Using a Racial Literacy Framework

Racial literacy frameworks have been applied by education researchers in their studies in varying ways. Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor (2014) simply stated, “We use a racial literacy framework to highlight the importance of recognizing, responding to, and countering forms of everyday racism, especially in classrooms” (p. 83). Their study of a grade eleven English classroom used racial literacy to focus on what conversations about race can reveal about teachers’ proficiency and level of comfort when engaging in discussions of race and racism, and how these conversations can lead to social justice goals like challenging power and privilege and preparing all students to be citizens (Vetter & Hungerford-Kressor, 2014). Sealey-Ruiz (2021), whose policy brief on racial literacy focused on teacher educators, offered six components for racial literacy development. These components began with “interruption” which requires teacher candidates to “interrupt racism and inequality at personal and systematic levels” (p. 6). Sealey-Ruiz (2021) then described a process by which racial literacy develops from an “archaeology of self” an interrogation of personal beliefs and “historical literacy” an awareness of individual contexts and how they are shaped by history and moves to “critical reflection” on privilege and marginalization and “critical humility” which requires open minded understanding of issues of race(ism), and finally a caring for the people or “critical love” for the community (p. 6). Sealey-Ruiz (2021) used these six components as ways to train and then measure the racial literacy of prospective teachers.

In her study of secondary English teachers from the United States and Canada, Skerrett (2011) used a racial literacy framework to identify three levels or ways to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of her participants’ knowledge and ability to implement racial literacy instruction and antiracist practices in secondary English classrooms. She characterized the use of

racial literacy by participants as apprehensive and authorized, for teachers who were hesitant to discuss race but did so if opportunities came up within the official curriculum; incidental and ill-informed, for teachers whose use of racial literacy lacked consistency, happening only when the topic came up randomly and ill-informed because teachers' knowledge about race and racism was insufficient or even problematic; and sustained and strategic, for teachers who incorporated an antiracism stance throughout their practice, curriculum, and philosophies (Skerrett, 2011).

Rolón-Dow et al. (2021) were critical of assigning levels, categorizing, or attempting to measure teachers' racial literacy proficiency. They stated, "We did not find it helpful to place the participants in a developmental continuum, ranked by their level of racial literacy" (p. 676). However, Skerrett (2011) used the categories of apprehensive and authorized; incidental and ill-informed; or sustained and strategic as a way to make sense of these differences, not to judge teachers or condemn them by labeling them "incidental and ill-informed" or to praise "sustained and strategic" teachers for being racially literate. Skerrett's (2011) categories were fluid and depending on the context, sometimes a teacher would be in one category and sometimes another. In my own experience I know I have fluctuated within these categories. It is the fluidity of the three approaches to racial literacy highlighted in her study that helped her understand and chronicle her participants' experiences and I would argue provide optimism by showing that wherever teachers were, they could learn, adjust, and grow. The fluidity of Skerrett's framework fits into the idea that antiracism is a nonlinear process of becoming. This idea was prominent in discussions of and attempts to implement antiracist teaching practices throughout the literature. (Falter et al., 2020; Neville, 2020a; Rolón-Dow, 2021; Skerrett, 2011). There were few studies that examined what becoming antiracist and more racially literate looked like in varying contexts.

Rolón-Dow et al. (2021) focused on the notion that teachers are not one homogenous group, instead of attempting to identify their specific levels of proficiency. Even if statistical data show that teachers and teacher candidates throughout the United States are predominately white (Picower, 2021), teachers are individuals with ideologies and different approaches to racial literacy, and schools are not homogenous places. Therefore, the context must also be taken into consideration as racial literacy is highly context specific (de los Rios et al., 2019; Neville, 2020a; Rolón-Dow et al., 2021; Skerrett, 2011). The school and community, the socioeconomic makeup of the students, and the diversity of the faculty all contribute to the racial literacy of teachers in their individual schools.

Racial Literacy Theory and the Study of Antiracist English Educators

Using a racial literacy framework supported the goals of this study, which proposed using a teacher inquiry group to examine how English teachers from different contexts grew in their understanding of themselves as antiracist teachers and attempted to do antiracist work in the classrooms where they teach. Applying a racial literacy lens gave me a practical framework for understanding and identifying both the collective journey of the teacher inquiry group and the individual journeys of its members. Like Rolón-Dow et al. (2021), I used racial literacy as a framework not with the intention to rank, measure, or label the participants, but as a tool to support me as the researcher to frame the unique and differing experiences of the participants, including myself. Racial literacy offered a practical way to organize and analyze the data including the difficult discussions and personal storytelling the teacher inquiry group produced.

The English teachers in my study joined the teacher inquiry group with varying levels of comfort engaging in discussions of race and different approaches to implementing antiracist

teaching practices and confronting racism in their classrooms, their schools, and in their curriculum. This was expected. Vetter and Hungerford-Kressor (2014) advised,

The practice of racial literacy means to hear and appreciate diverse and unfamiliar experiences, recognize how to ask questions, view racial issues through a critical lens that recognizes current and institutional aspects of racism, and engage in talk even when it is difficult or awkward. (p. 84)

The journey(s) the teachers in inquiry group were taking required new ways of thinking, discussing, and viewing ourselves, our practice, and race, racism, and white supremacy, racial literacy was an apt framework to make meaning of our complex work and present it in a clear and understandable way.

In this study I facilitated a teacher inquiry group that embarked on a continuous and nonlinear journey to becoming antiracist English teachers. As the forthcoming literature review will show, a teacher's identity, how teachers engage with race, and their willingness to take action are crucial steps in beginning a journey to becoming antiracist.

Literature Review

In an effort to situate my study within the complicated prevailing conversation about antiracist education, I honed my attention on literature pertaining to antiracist English teachers and teaching specifically. To search for literature, I used search terms such as: English teacher, English teaching, or English instruction paired with various combinations of the words: antiracist and antiracism. I also paired these words with peripheral subjects such as: multicultural, culturally relevant, and teacher education. I relied on databases in the ProQuest Education Collection, Education Research Complete, and ERIC and I mined the reference pages of sources I found helpful and pertinent to the study of antiracist English teachers. Sifting through the

search results, I included five books and thirty-two articles in this literature review. As I narrowed my search, I was cognizant of when the literature was written, seeing the summer of 2020 as a watershed moment or dividing point when antiracism became a national concern, not just an academic one. I relied heavily on resources from the last three years, 2020 through 2022, and identified scholars who were cited often in other works.

The literature provided me with several relevant themes to explore. The most prevalent theme was a call to action; all of the subsequent themes relate back to the importance and necessity of taking action and the urgency to do so. Some of the literature identified beginning actions like awareness and acknowledgement and some argued that real action moved beyond just understanding racial inequities in the classroom to transformation. The other themes pertinent to my study included teacher understanding of their own identity, teacher complicity in a racist system, being antiracist required nuanced understandings, a challenge to change the prevailing narrative, and ways of becoming antiracist. An examination of these themes revealed three overarching ideas:

1. All teachers wanting to do this work will have to grapple with their own identities, ideologies, stories, and histories.
2. The uncomfortable work of antiracism is work that requires a commitment from all educators regardless of race to center race and move beyond acknowledgement to engage in action against individual and institutional forms of racism.
3. The goal of engaging in antiracist teaching is not to arrive at a specific place of knowing, it is a difficult endless process of becoming.

These ideas served as a way of organizing this literature review and were central to my study of teachers who were in the process of becoming antiracist English teachers.

Teachers Understanding Their Own Complex Identities

Teachers' understanding of their own identities is massively important to beginning work toward antiracist teaching. Although identity work is the first step, it is also a never ending one. Regardless of where in the continuum teachers begin, from preservice teachers through more experienced practicing teachers, English teachers need to continue an examination of self. Ebarvia (2021) contended, "As teachers, we must persistently ask ourselves how our own racialized, gendered, and other socialized identities affect how we choose texts, deliver instruction, and most importantly, engage with students" (p. 584). Thereby the response to oppression in our classrooms becomes embedded through the constant questioning and attention to how the teacher's identity impacts students (Ebarvia, 2021). In classrooms, this identity work should focus on how aspects of teachers' and their students' identities contribute to the way they read texts and the world (de los Rios, 2019; Ebarvia, 2021; Freire, 1970).

For English educators in particular, "The literature in our curriculum is often weighted with dilemmas of race, ethnicity, and other aspects of identity" (Thomas, 2015, p. 172), clearly navigating English curricula that are so tied to identity require teachers to have a clear understanding of their own. Skerrett (2008) offered that "English teachers' multicultural and antiracist transformations of the official curriculum are matters of identity and agency that are related to sociocultural influences" (p. 1813). She further acknowledged that there are a range of what she calls "biographical influences" (p. 1817), including teacher education experiences, prior experience with diversity, and generational status that contribute to a teacher's identity that ultimately influence their experience, effectiveness, and desire to implement antiracist English teaching practices. Without an understanding of their own complex identities, teachers cannot do the work of antiracism. In addition to biographical factors of individual teachers a large part of

identity stems from the historical and social construction of race (Casey & McManimon, 2021; Utt & Tochluk, 2020). Although the literature suggested all teachers must examine their identity as part of becoming antiracist educators, white teachers, who make up the highest percentage of the teaching force (Picower, 2021), in particular must acknowledge their whiteness as a part of their identity (Casey & McManimon, 2021; Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Utt & Tochluk, 2020).

Casey and McManimon (2021) wrote:

We needed to understand ourselves as racialized white actors, to ask such questions as: How am I part of these histories, structures, and interactions? How do I see and read myself— and my personal identity— into the racialized world— while at the same time recognizing that whiteness is a part of but not my whole self? (p. 34)

Casey and McManimon (2021) examined how a teacher's white identity, although only one aspect of their identity, still makes them complicit. Just as Tanner (2019) struggled with ways to take action against white supremacy knowing he as a white teacher was in fact part of the problem. Overall acknowledging white complicity was a prevalent theme among the scholars cited in this literature review (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Casey & McManimon, 2021; Jupp et al., 2018; Picower, 2021; Tanner, 2019; Young, 2020). I discuss complicity as a theme in the next section.

White teacher identity studies can help white teachers better understand their complex identities. First wave white identity studies focused on white teachers' race-evasive identities and their use of colorblindness which allowed them to ignore or deny the importance of race and privilege in their classrooms and in their practice (Jupp et al., 2016, Wetzel, 2020). Jupp and colleagues (2016) reviewed the field of second wave white teacher identity studies which contrast first wave studies, in that second wave white identity studies "examines the identities of

white teachers who, with more and less success, are attempting to come to grips with their own complexity and complicity in a white-supremacist system and seeking to learn how to fight against it” (Jupp & Lensmire, 2016, p. 986). A commonality in the literature on second wave white identity studies was the complexity of an individual’s identity (Jupp et al., 2016; Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Lynch, 2018). Just as educators must understand, acknowledge, and make allowances for the intersectional identities of their students, these understandings must first begin with the self (Jupp et al., 2016; Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Utt & Tochluk, 2016). There was a recognition in the literature that questions of race, white supremacy, and antiracist action called for a more complex or a more nuanced understanding of white racial identity (Berchini, 2019; Borsheim-Black, 2015; Lensmire et al., 2013; Picower, 2021; Utt & Tochluk, 2016) and the acknowledgement of whiteness and white privilege should not be oversimplified.

Berchini (2019) expressed her frustration with the abundance of research into white identity that places the blame for inequity in schools on ill prepared ignorant novice white teachers for being unaware of their white privilege. She said, “Not only do we not need any more of these illustrations—if you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all—but the question, for me, has become: Is there another way to think about the fraught work of antiracist white teachers?” (p. 172). Lensmire et al. (2013) also cautioned that “white privilege pedagogy demands confession and how to confess is a dead end for antiracist action” (p. 410). Merely confessing by stating out loud or otherwise — I have white privilege — is only one kind of acknowledgement. Second wave whiteness studies advocated for open acknowledgement of whiteness that leads to open dialogue and action. Action for example can be for teachers to continually question how privilege impacts what is being taught and learned and use their “curricular powers” to address these impacts (Winn, 2018, p. 261). Kinloch and Dixon (2017) argued that teachers must

scrutinize their racialized identities first in order to implement antiracist strategies. As white educators come to terms with the pervasive problem of whiteness in schools and their own white identities, they can then begin the work of being antiracist allies, advocates, or activists for their students of color (Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Lynch, 2018; Tanner, 2019).

Ways for Teachers to Understand Who They Are. Like the calls to action to become antiracist, there were multiple suggestions for how teachers can, as Utt and Tochluk (2020) suggested, “know thyself” (p. 125). They recommended six areas of self-work for white teachers to undertake. These areas include four ways of knowing oneself: analyzing privilege and microaggressions; exploring aspects of their identities such as their culture or ethnicity; engaging with the history of multiracial struggles as well as white antiracist history; and developing an identity that is intersectional and accounts for all parts of their identity. The remaining two areas are practical ways to take action: by building a community that is antiracist and taking accountability across race. Utt and Tochluk (2020) believed these areas useful for white teachers to “develop a foundation that supports a healthier, positive, anti-racist understanding of themselves” (p. 131). In another suggestion, Ebarvia (2021) cited Love’s (2018) four stages for developing a liberatory consciousness: “awareness, analysis, action, and accountability/allyship” (p. 581) as ways for teachers to come to an understanding of themselves. These stages are on a continuum, instead of jumping right into action, teachers need to start with an awareness and analysis where they scrutinize the impact of racism and other oppressive systems and move forward to what role they play and what action they should take (Ebarvia, 2021).

Wetzel (2020) studied the issue of whiteness and white teacher identity in teacher education programs. She highlighted whiteness as a major obstacle for teachers who want to do antiracist work and explained that not all identity work would lead to consciousness raising. If

teacher candidates looked at their identities only as a way to find commonalities with their students, they risked seeing race as unimportant instead of central and risked viewing their students with racial identities different from their own through a deficit lens (Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Wetzel, 2020).

Wetzel (2020) argued that teacher educators need to guide teacher candidates to an awareness of self that examines “where their deficit perspectives come from – their participation in systematic racism and gaps in their knowledge about structural inequities” (p. 309). Jupp and Lensmire (2016) and Kinloch and Dixon (2017) too advocated for a centering of whiteness through consciousness raising and included the importance of teachers understanding their place in the history of whiteness and racism. For example, Love (2019) suggested drawing attention to “where we stand in relation to systems of privilege and oppression and unlearning the habits and practices that protect those systems” (p. 118). Winn (2018) further identified an unfortunate lack of attention to this history as teachers “undermine their own historicized selves in favor of a normalized discourse of personal responsibility and academic success” (p. 153). In other words, because teacher candidates have good intentions and are typically academically successful, they find it hard to acknowledge a history that has not had the same effect on them as it has had on their students of color. Jupp and Lensmire, (2016) and Casey and McManimon (2021) encouraged English teachers, particularly white English teachers, to also understand where they fit in today. Casey and McManimon (2021) argued, teachers should question “What does it mean to be white in the United States today, in a time and in spaces (including our schools) where the values of neoliberal capitalism are often paramount (even if hidden)? In the context of white supremacy, what is my personal identity and commitment?” (p. 34). These are compelling questions that correspond with the questions I started asking myself during the summer of 2020.

The question that prompted this study was what I, a white woman, teacher of English, should be doing?

Due to the importance of teachers understanding their own complex identities, Wetzel (2020) highlighted the necessity of beginning teacher identity work early. She questioned, “How are preservice teachers supported to build new, brave practices that lead to more socially just classrooms and schools, and in what ways is whiteness and its invisibility a barrier to such work?” (p. 308). Although my study focused on inservice teachers, these questions still applied. Identity work, like antiracist work, is ongoing and teacher history and identity were central to the antiracist work we as a teacher inquiry group attempted to do in this study.

Teacher Complicity in a Racist System. An integral part of teachers’ acknowledgment of their privileges and/or disadvantages is related to examining their complicity in the structural nature of racism in schools (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Young, 2020). Much of the literature about teacher identity and taking action to incorporate antiracist teaching in classrooms discussed teachers’ complicity (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Casey & McManimon, 2021; Jupp et al., 2018; Picower, 2021; Sinclair, 2018; Tanner, 2019; Young, 2020). One problem with being complicit is that it requires teachers to admit they are “wrong.” The denotation of the word complicit is wrongdoing. Teachers in particular do not like to be wrong and as a profession are often held to higher standards of behavior than other professions (Casey & McManimon, 2021). Unless teachers can acknowledge their complicity in the pervasive racism that occupies schools, they cannot be agents of change. Kinloch and Dixon (2017) described white educators who hoped “to liberate urban students of color without realizing their own racial culpability in maintaining whiteness” (p. 335) as lacking the critical consciousness to do antiracist work or promote equity

and justice in classrooms. Therefore, acknowledging complicity is a difficult but necessary part of becoming antiracist English teachers.

The second problem with complicity is once one admits to being complicit, teachers wonder what can be done about it. Picower (2021) went as far as to say, “To acknowledge that racism exists but deny your complicity in it is self-serving . . . To acknowledge it exists, feel bad about it, but not think you can do anything about it is laziness” (p. 81). A part of acknowledging one’s white privilege, is acknowledging complicity, which is essential before antiracist action can be taken. While most teachers come into the profession with good intentions, as seen from the literature on teacher identity and second wave whiteness studies (Tanner, 2019; Wetzel, 2020; Young, 2020), they may fail to realize their role in the harm or wrongdoing they are perpetuating in their classrooms (Johnson, 2020, Love, 2019). Susan Sontag (2003) in her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, stated:

So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent—if not inappropriate—response. To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a consideration of how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways that we prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only the initial spark. (p. 102)

Although Sontag (2003) was defending her use of explicit pictures of the Vietnam War, parallels can be drawn between her message to viewers, that ignoring the pictures is ignoring the reality of their complicity. Therefore, admitting complicity, as difficult as it may be, is necessary

and a beginning step in antiracist action. The acknowledgement of complicity, like the acknowledgement of white privilege, is more than just proclaiming I am complicit; it is knowing what the wrongdoing or harm is and actively working to change it. The violence of the curriculum is obviously different from the violence of the Vietnam War, but curricular violence is also traumatic and detrimental (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Johnson, 2020; Jupp et al., 2016; Picower, 2021). The ways teachers are complicit in racial violence in classrooms include:

We invoke racial violence when we don't include literature that portrays Black and Brown people as heroes and victors. We invoke racial violence when we fail to portray Black and Brown as heroines and activists. We invoke racial violence when we don't affirm or sustain Black and Brown youths' multiple languages and literacies in our classrooms. We invoke racial violence when we don't cultivate critical media literacies that Black and Brown youth can use to critique, rewrite, and dismantle the damaging narratives that mainstream media has written about them. We invoke racial violence when we don't provide opportunities for young people to speak back, to, and against racial oppression. (Baker-Bell et al., 2017, p. 123)

It is important to note all of these examples relate directly to literacy and highlight the power English teachers have to either push against or perpetuate curricular violence. An acknowledgement of complicity allows English teachers to choose the former and counteract the curricular violence that Baker-Bell et al. (2017) described.

Tanner (2019) contended that because of white supremacy, "I'm complicit and will never be absolved" (p. 195) but being complicit is not only about identity, it is also about the choices teachers make in the classroom. Young (2020) identified that "teachers believe that their hands are tied . . . that they must adhere to the prescribed standards set by their building principals, the

school board, the governing body of their educational institutions, and/or those who administer and grade state-mandated literacy tests” (p. 89). Therefore, English teachers are not just unknowingly complicit, they make conscious choices oftentimes related to policies that reinforce their complicity.

The importance of acknowledging complicity cannot be overstated and although Picower (2021) contended, “Most of the teachers creating or enacting racialized curricular violence are not tiki torch-carrying White nationalist” (p. 62); good intentions alone will not bring about action or change (Tanner, 2019). When teachers examine their whiteness or their racial ideology “it is in the response to examination of their ideology that change is possible” (Picower, 2021, p. 64). Baker-Bell and colleagues (2017) offered, “the ways in which we handle racism and racial violence today will affect how racism and state-sanctioned racial violence will manifest themselves in our future” (p. 126). With that in mind, once the complicity is recognized and accepted, action through antiracist teaching can and should be taken.

A Call to Action

The origin of my study of English teachers becoming antiracist was the desire to take action. Similarly, and unsurprisingly, a common thread within the literature pertaining to antiracist English teachers was the call to action of teachers. Whether the suggested action was for a dismantling of white supremacy and anti-black racism (Baker-Bell, 2020; Love, 2019), decolonizing classrooms and the curriculum (Sinclair, 2018), upending colonial practices that cause students of color harm (de los Rios et al., 2019), or disrupting practices that evade rather than center race (Wetzel, 2020), the research pointed to actions needing to be taken against whiteness, white supremacy, and white privilege in order for classrooms to become places of learning instead of places of oppression. One prevailing idea that was evident throughout the

literature was that teachers' actions cannot be superficial (Baker-Bell, 2020; de los Rios et al., 2019; Love, 2019; Sinclair, 2018; Wetzell, 2020). In order to undertake action, "Teaching for an anti-racist future starts with educators" (Falter et al., 2020, p. 1). Educators who are on the front lines interacting with students on a daily basis must be the ones to take action. They cannot wait and hope for schools, communities, or societies to change. The call to action for teachers was persistent, and a sense of urgency for action that would lead to positive change pervaded the literature.

For teachers, particularly white teachers, often antiracist action begins with understanding one's privilege or by taking a more multicultural approach to the literature they teach; but these are only starting points, action cannot end there (Baker-Bell, 2020b; Lensmire et al., 2013; Sinclair, 2018). Lensmire et al. (2013) critiqued Peggy Macintosh's (1988) seminal work, where she likened white privilege to an invisible knapsack, prompting white teachers, and white people in general to come to a realization and sometimes even a confession about their privileges. Although Macintosh's article and acknowledging privilege are an important part of becoming antiracist, Lensmire et al. (2013) pushed beyond mere acknowledgement and wondered if using the metaphor of the knapsack, which focuses mainly on individuals instead of the systemic or institutional nature of racism, served as an ending to antiracist work and prevented real action from taking place.

Sinclair (2018) further suggested, "One obvious starting point for decolonizing our classrooms is to change what we teach. But that's not as simple as swapping out the books on the shelf" (p. 91). While including some multicultural texts or acknowledging our own privilege are valid starting points, these actions can become superficial changes that can lead to tokenism or inclusion for inclusion's sake instead of real change (Berchini, 2016). Picower (2021) described

antiracism as a stance and highlighted that antiracist action cannot be a superficial or a one-time effort. Racism is pervasive in schools (Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Lynch, 2018; Picower, 2021; Skerrett, 2008; Wetzel, 2020), and in order for teachers to become antiracist and for classrooms to become more equitable, additional action needs to be taken. Although there was agreement within the literature that real ongoing change needs to happen, there was less of a consensus on how to achieve real transformative change. Real ongoing change is difficult to define and even harder to enact, but when the change is significant enough to be noticeable and transformative it improves the education and life chances of students.

Antiracist Action Leading Transformative Change. Some authors gave very explicit suggestions for ways to take action to bring about significant change in schools, classrooms, and society at large (de los Rios et al., 2020; Falter et al., 2020; Picower, 2021; Utt & Tochluk, 2020). For example, as previously described Utt and Tochluk (2020) offered six areas of self-work necessary for teachers to develop positive antiracist identities. Falter and colleagues (2020) proposed five steps for educators to follow to become antiracist English teachers: “Listen and reflect; Read; Interrogate; Act; Repeat” (p. 2). They challenged English teachers to think about where they are, read and educate themselves, use this knowledge to interrogate their curriculum and practice, and then gave a list of practical actions. As they issued a direct call to action for English teachers, Falter et al. (2020) asked, “How can we move listening to action, reflection to change, and interrogation to transformation?” (p. 12). Much of the action they suggested is on a school or district level. For example, they advocated for hiring more teachers of color or adopting social justice standards in conjunction with state English language arts (ELA) standards as actions that could bring about real change. Several authors were less specific in suggesting how to take action but proposed that English teachers must become activists (de los Rios et al.,

2020; Johnson, 2018; Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Simon, 2015) in order for any real change to happen.

In addition to suggested actions to become antiracist educators, authors also provided don'ts or actions that would counteract antiracism initiatives. Falter et al. (2020) compiled a list of actions to stop like: "Please do not do a *separate* 'diversity unit' or 'multicultural unit.' Being Black, Asian, or Latinx, for example, is not something that lasts for one month or one unit. This articulates that white experiences are the default" (p. 18). Other scholars and studies offered don'ts as well, for example, don't approach antiracism as charity work or as a savior to communities of color (Love, 2019; Picower, 2021). Don't use so called antiracist activities like privilege walks which aim to bring awareness to students, especially white students, about their privileges but instead may highlight the imbalance of power and privilege in a classroom and cause discomfort to students of color (Sarigianides & Banack, 2021; Sassi & Thomas, 2008) or don't use writing assignments that purposely have students take on the persona of an oppressor or the oppressed (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019; Picower, 2021). This kind of thinking and these activities prioritize white students' learning about race at the expense of the well-being of students of color and often look at students of color and their communities through a deficit lens (Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Sassi & Thomas, 2008; Wetzel, 2020). These activities do not acknowledge that antiracist work benefits all children not just white children or just children of color (Falter et al., 2020; Picower, 2020; Sinclair, 2018; Vetter & Hungerford-Kressor, 2014). Although the approaches varied, there was agreement that real action does not just acknowledge or identify the problem. Acknowledging is an important step, but real action moves beyond beginning thoughts, awareness, and quick fixes to bring about change (Falter et al., 2020; Johnson, 2018; Love, 2019; Picower, 2021). In the literature what was referred to as real actions

are ways of being antiracist that can be done by individual teachers, by schools and districts, or by teacher educators.

Antiracist Action in Teacher Education. Several authors suggested that antiracist action should begin with teacher education because it prepares candidates before they enter the classroom (Johnson, 2018; Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Neville, 2020; Ohito, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Skerrett, 2008; Young, 2020). Once again there were a multitude of ways researchers suggested for teacher educators and teacher education programs to prepare teachers to teach with antiracism and social justice goals. In teacher education programs, preservice teachers could be asked to examine their identities through discussion, reflection, or writing about themselves and their experiences (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019) and be introduced to new ways of seeing the world (Neville, 2020; Skerrett, 2008). One suggestion was creating a critical race English education (CREE), which are pedagogical practices that address white supremacy and anti-black racism in English education (Johnson, 2018; Sinclair, 2018). Johnson (2018) explained, “I aim to move critical conversations and the pedagogical practices around the intersections of anti-blackness, violence, language, literacy, and education from the margins to the center of discussion and praxis in ELA contexts” (p. 105). Other authors called for practicing teachers to become more racially literate (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Neville, 2020, 2020a) or to lean into progressive teaching strategies like culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ohito, 2016; Thomas, 2015; Wells & Cordova-Cobo, 2021). Wells and Cordova-Cobo (2021) suggested in their report, “a call to action, therefore, for a much-needed return to more progressive, student-centered educational strategies, which could easily be integrated with multiple anti-racist education reform approaches . . .” (para. 4). Finally, Young (2020) called for a radical liberatory antiracist literacy which he assured despite the name even novice educators who did not consider

themselves as radical would be able to engage in. Young (2020) suggested teacher candidates can be taught to question “long-held ideologies . . . presented as foundational pillars of education, despite more progressive ideas” (p. 90). Regardless of the chosen method whether preservice teachers examine their identities, learn student centered teaching practices, or adopt culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies, the main message was that antiracist action must be taken before teachers begin their teaching tenure, to prepare teachers to be antiracist, new ways of doing teacher education are required, and these proposed changes to teacher education were not simple or quick fixes.

Taking Action Is Hard. Another consensus across the literature was that such antiracist work is difficult, but that difficulty should not stand in the way or serve as a deterrent to taking action (Rolón-Dow et al., 2021; Picower, 2021; Tanner, 2019). Promoting antiracist teaching in schools is not easy. Tanner (2019), a white teacher, critiqued his own attempts at taking action. He was strong in his conviction to do the work necessary and provided an entire list of ways he attempted to dismantle white supremacy, for example, admitting he has white privilege or “loudly identify[ing] as an ally” (p. 194). Still, he questioned what the work actually is: “Still, I worry none of these actions . . . actually help me figure out my problem. I continue to be white and continue to live and work in schools and a society that, whether we white people realize it or not, produce white supremacy” (p. 195). Tanner (2019) identified an inherent tension for white teachers attempting to become antiracist and highlighted the discomfort and emotional toll felt by teachers as a difficulty and deterrent to engaging in antiracist work. Teachers who do commit to taking action, have to honestly examine how their own bias and complicity potentially add to the problem (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018; Ohito, 2016; Rolón-Dow et al., 2021; Tanner, 2019).

In addition to the personal toll of the work, when determining how to take action, teachers have additional obstacles to consider: curriculum, mandates, administration, time constraints, etc. (Picower, 2021) that can and will impede an educator's ability to do antiracist work in schools. Doing antiracist work requires pushing back on an institution that provides a teacher's livelihood (Picower, 2021) and an institution that is part of longstanding traditions that reinforce the status quo and neoliberal ideas (Borsheim-Black, 2015; Casey & McManimon, 2021; Givens, 2021; Ohito, 2019; Wetzel, 2020) These are mighty forces for teachers to reckon with and choosing a course of action is also difficult. Johnson (2020) suggested to white educators:

The confusing, perhaps contradictory advice on what white people should do probably feels maddening. To be told to step up, no step back, read, no listen, protest, don't protest, check on black friends, leave us alone, ask for help or do the work." (para. 13)

He did not excuse educators, nor did he suggest that teachers throw up their hands and declare the situation impossible. Although choosing an action and acting on it may be challenging, Johnson (2020) had faith that educators, including white educators, "will figure it out" (para. 13). In addition, Dunn and Love (2020) presented a positive outlook for antiracist work. They stated, "Like the artist, educators and researchers must reflect the times, we must craft and commit to antiracist language arts pedagogies that seek truth, mutuality, love, and most importantly Black joy" (p. 191). Johnson (2018) called for "unconditional love" for students of color (p. 109). These Black scholars noted the beauty and humanizing impact in working toward antiracist teaching and how the work benefits all who are involved, teachers and students alike (Dunn & Love, 2020; Navarro, 2020).

Whatever action antiracist educators or those who wish to become antiracist take, whether the action is to challenge existing curriculum and make conscious decisions about what and how to teach, to scrutinize their privilege or place in a racist society and change practices that support systems of oppression, or by finding ways to counteract the harm of curricular violence; antiracism is not easy. There was no doubt expressed in the literature about the obstacles and the personal discomfort required to disrupt racism and create an antiracist environment in the classroom. Johnson (2018) stated, “I extend the #BlackLivesMatter movement to language and literacy studies, ELA classrooms, and English education because we, as educators, cannot allow these pressing issues to go unaddressed” (p. 104). With all that is at stake, teachers simply have no choice but to act now. There is little doubt in the literature that in order to act effectively, teachers require nuanced understandings of the problem of racism in schools.

Being Antiracist Requires Nuanced Understandings

Another area of cohesion within the literature was the idea that in order to engage in antiracism more nuanced or complex understandings of race and racism as well as identity are necessary. The word nuance itself came up many times in my reading about becoming an antiracist English teacher (Berchini, 2019; Borsheim-Black, 2015; Colomer, 2019; Lensmire et al., 2013; Picower, 2021; Utt & Tochluk, 2016). Multiple writers have expressed that for too long the status quo has existed to reinforce binaries, leaving many to believe that society, schools, and people can be summed up in black and white (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018; Neville, 2020a; Wetzel, 2020). Neville (2020a) stated, “The process of understanding racial inequities as interacting with both the individual and the institutional involves the rejection of an ‘either/or’ binary” (p. 376) reinforcing that antiracist work in general and in the English classroom in

particular is far more complicated and a much more nuanced understanding of race, identity, context, and curriculum is required.

The first nuanced understanding requires keeping in mind the duality of English classrooms themselves. On one hand, English teachers can “use the tools found in English classrooms (poetry, prose, memoir, drama, writing for variety of purposes, dialogue, discussion, debate) to facilitate ‘sociocritical literacy,’ learning that keeps children present and motivates them to be civic actors in their schools and communities” (Winn, 2018, p. 256). While simultaneously “Our discipline of ELA teaching has historically been a site that reinforces racism through the overwhelming Whiteness of the profession, the ways we teach—and police—writing (Baker-Bell), the texts that we teach, and the ways that we teach them” (Sarigianides & Banack, 2021, p. 18). English teachers who want to enact antiracism in their classrooms have to navigate in a space where both of these truths coexist. Working toward antiracist teaching practices, particularly those undertaken in the English classroom, require a nuanced understanding of the subject of English and its complicated connections to race, identity, privilege, curriculum, and context.

As teachers implement antiracist pedagogies in English classrooms, they have to contend with multiple complexities. For example, just framing racism “as a concept to be learned and assessed, rather than a belief to be challenged” (Borsheim-Black, 2015, p. 426) requires a more complex understanding of race. In her case study, Borsheim-Black (2015) investigated how a second-year white female English teacher, Ms. Allen, in a predominately white school attempted to implement antiracist pedagogy into her literature instruction. Through this study, she highlighted how racism in the classroom existed at the individual, institutional, societal, and epistemological levels. For example, at the institutional level Borsheim-Black (2015) examined

curricular and instructional norms and found traditional literature instruction was antithetical to antiracist practices and at the epistemological level she examined “the assumption that traditional literature instruction is ideologically neutral” which caused Ms. Allen to question whether or not antiracist practices are appropriate (p. 425). Breaking down the levels of racism revealed simply finding occasions to discuss racism is only a small part of the race problem. Due to race and racism being embedded to varying degrees in all aspects of school, engaging students in productive talk about race is much more complex than talking about race in the context of literature (Borsheim-Black, 2015).

Berchini’s (2019) study which built on, and in some ways, critiqued Borsheim-Black’s (2015) work, studied a first-year white male English teacher in a predominately white school as he attempted to teach his students about whiteness, white supremacy, and white privilege. In both case studies, the participant teachers lamented their curricula for only including one book considered multicultural or the only title with which to teach about racism because it explicitly discussed race or had racism as a theme. A more nuanced understanding of the curriculum and how race and racism are represented is required. For example, teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (1960) has been a staple of English curriculums nationwide, from the beginning the novel was highly praised for its condemnation of the unfair treatment of a black man in the court system. As calls to reevaluate curriculum and criticism of *To Kill a Mockingbird* mount (Borsheim-Black, 2015; Johnson, 2018, Lensmire et al., 2013), merely questioning if the novel should be excluded or replaced, is an oversimplified response to the greater problem. Adhering to antiracist practices is about much more than one or a few books. It is about representation, whose stories are told and by whom, but it is also about how texts as well as writing are taught in the English classroom (Baker-Bell, 2020b; Falter et al., 2020; Wetzel, 2020).

Borsheim-Black (2015) argued, “whether and how English teachers navigate the topic of racism in literature study has long-lasting implications for what students do or do not learn about racism” (p. 426), reasserting the significance of antiracist work in the English classroom and the importance of how the curriculum is presented. Antiracist practices include approaching all titles as opportunities to teach about race and racism (Sarigianides & Banack, 2021; Wetzel, 2020). Teachers need to use their own agency to work alongside, within, and outside of the proscribed curriculum to make connections with and for their students (Skerrett, 2008).

I strongly believe any novel can be used to examine race. For example, *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner is a novel about a poor white family in the rural south during the Great Depression. Although race is not a subject of the novel per se, Faulkner’s use of multiple narrators lends itself to discussions of perspective and power in and outside of family relationships. Teachers can use a novel such as this to point out these issues and highlight the absence of particular voices and stories which is equally significant (Neville, 2020). Teachers can also pair Faulkner’s work with a piece like *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. Hansberry, writing from the perspective of an author of color, presents a complex Black family who deal with issues of power and perspective within and from outside of their family in a positive way. We live in a racialized society and everything we read, view, experience is shaped by and can be looked at through a racial lens (Casey & McManimon, 2021; de los Rios, 2019). Casey and McManimon (2021) used readers of Toni Morrison’s short story “Recitatif” in which the race of the main characters is purposefully ambiguous as an example. They wrote:

The removal of racial codes in a story about race, class, gender, and family in the United States is upsetting for many readers. It calls into stark relief how racialized our worlds

are, as we want to know: Who is white? Who is Black? How can we understand these characters if we do not know this? (p. 36)

This question shows the complexity of thinking about and discussing race in the classroom. The implicit reliance on race to create meaning is problematic. To add to the complexity, race is not the only lens; identities as well as oppressions are intersectional (Collins & Bilge, 2019). Like Morrison, Garvin (2016) in his young adult novel, *The Symptoms of Being Human*, presents a main character, Riley, who is gender fluid and sometimes identifies as a girl and sometimes a boy. When students discussed the novel at a book club at the school where I teach, many were bothered that the author never assigned Riley a gender. Much like race, their ideas about gender were so deeply ingrained they had a hard time not considering gender while making sense of the text. Clearly, navigating discussions of race and its intersections with gender, class, and sexuality at the individual, institutional, societal, and epistemological levels reveal an extreme amount of complexity for teachers to consider.

In the midst of all this complexity and uncertainty, one thing is for certain, the constraints of the curriculum are not legitimate reasons for not engaging in antiracist work. In fact, the lack of representation within the curriculum and the racialized society in which teachers are teaching and learning makes this work all the more necessary (Berchini, 2019; Borsheim-Black, 2015). Moving beyond oversimplified and binary views and having a more nuanced understanding of the complex topics and ideas of identity, race, racism, and in the varying contexts of our schools the curriculum, improve the ability of teachers to become antiracist English teachers and better serve all of their students.

Challenging and Changing the Narrative

Narrative was discussed in the literature, although not as prevalent as some of the other themes, as both something to acknowledge and challenge as well as a means for incorporating antiracist practices and racial literacy into the English classroom (Baker-Bell, 2020a, 2020b; Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Colomer, 2019; Givens, 2021; Johnson, 2018; Ohito, 2019; Sassi & Thomas, 2008; Winn, 2018). The use of narrative in the literature caught my attention as an English teacher and a feminist researcher. Feminists understand the importance of narrative “to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy (Gloria Anzaldua)” (Moraga & Anzaldua, 2015, p. 42). Stories are a valuable way to gain the perspective of the storyteller and personal narratives are an effective way to conduct feminist research (Leavy & Harris, 2019).

In becoming antiracist, a focus on narrative was befitting the subject of English where stories are an integral part of the curriculum and learning. Sinclair (2018) stated, “Literature can help us and our students identify and understand the systems at work in our society that we may have been previously blind to” (p. 91) and letting teachers working to combat racism and white supremacy tell their own stories is a powerful tool as well (Casey & McManimon, 2021; Sinclair, 2018). Casey and McManimon (2021) in their study of professional development for white teachers found, “we construct ourselves through (telling) stories; these stories (can) illustrate the structural nature of white supremacy, critique white as normal, standard, or good, examine power and what is at stake for whom” (p. 53). As teachers tell their stories the importance of whose story is told, who tells the story, and how the story is framed is revealed. Understanding the power of stories is crucial to antiracist practices in classrooms as some

dominant narratives about students are detrimental because they are stereotypical, untrue, or incomplete (Baker-Bell, 2020a, 2020b; Colomer, 2019, Johnson, 2018).

In her much watched TedTalk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) discussed the concept of “refusing secondly.” To “refuse secondly” is to reject stories that do not start at the beginning (Neville, 2020). For educators and education researchers, this could mean that instead of pointing to student achievement on standardized tests and questioning how to remediate, one would look first at the test itself. In her study, Neville (2020) suggested that along with knowing themselves, by “refusing secondly” (Adichie, 2009) preservice English language arts teachers could reject narratives about their students that did not include the entire story and thus become antiracist educators. Neville (2020) further suggested, for English teachers to choose texts that tell the whole story or include a wider perspective of historical and power relations related to race and racism. Navarro (2020) explained, “the schooling of youth of color is part of the larger settler-colonial project that forefronts Eurocentric curriculum, narratives, un-truthful histories, and further subjugates people of color through inaccurate depictions” (p. 158). Both Neville (2020) and Navarro (2020) reminded educators that they can challenge these detrimental narratives in schools by choosing texts that are representative of their students and by telling and letting students tell their own stories and histories. Antiracist teachers are encouraged to reject dominant narratives that cause harm (Colmer, 2019) and supply or allow students to provide a truer counternarrative (Johnson, 2020). Casey and McManimon (2021) described challenging narratives as, “a sophisticated pedagogical gesture, one that sees others not as fixed and static characters but rather as fluid and dynamic: as learners” (p. 94). In the forward to Picower’s book, *Reading, Writing, and Racism* (2021), Love identified:

What American schools fail to understand is that curriculum rich in the stories and lives Black, Brown, and people of color humanizes not only students of color but White students as well. The work of decolonizing the curriculum helps decolonize all children's thinking, and that is what education for social justice should be. (p. x)

In addition to ensuring representation of stories through the literature, representing student voices through speaking, and writing, which are also a part of New Jersey's core curriculum ELA standards, require attention from antiracist researchers, teachers, and activists. Baker-Bell (2020a) used established scholarship about Black English to demonstrate that classroom English unfairly favors white students while it promises Black students that "eradicating" their language will result in acceptance and freedom but instead reinforces anti-blackness and racism (p. 8). Although Baker-Bell's (2020a) focus was on creating an antiracist Black language pedagogy, her work brought up important questions for English educators considering antiracist practices and suggested helpful ways for identifying and pushing back against "white linguistic and cultural hegemony" (p. 8). One such practice was using antiracist critical media literacies to counter stereotypical narratives about black people. For example, "The portraits we see in movies such as *Dangerous Minds* are fantasy fiction; they do not reflect the daily lived realities of teachers and students" (Casey McManimon, 2021, p. 208).

Language is an innate part of identity and Baker-Bell (2020a) highlighted the damaging effect of promoting academic English only in the English classroom. This lens always views nonacademic English languages from a deficit perspective and erroneously promotes a standard form of English as the one correct form. Part of antiracist teaching is for teachers to push back on stereotypes and detrimental narratives even those that are accepted as sound teaching practices like a strict adherence to standard or academic English or English only policies. These policies

inflict harm on students (Johnson, 2018). Baker-Bell (2020b) stated, “As language and literacy researchers and educators, we cannot continue to push respectability language pedagogies that require Black students to project a white middle class identity” (p. 8). She showed that teaching English and implementing antiracist teaching practices will have to be intersectional and include language, along with race, class, culture, gender, and sexuality, not as peripheral to teaching literature or writing but as inseparable from it.

Teachers who are attempting to become antiracist need to reject policies and narratives that promote deficit lens and instead honor their students’ languages, stories, identities, and histories. In addition to students’ stories the literature conveyed that giving preservice and inservice teachers the opportunity to tell their stories, although difficult, provided them with insights into their identities, teaching practices, and that led to positive changes (Casey & McManimon, 2021; Kinloch & Dixon, 2017). Although “processing racial stories and experiences is anxiety-ridden,” the “benefits of storytelling include recognizing racial stress in oneself and in others and enhancing one’s competence during racially stressful situations” (Colomer, 2019, p. 5). Winn (2018) envisioned an inclusive classroom where teachers, “curate spaces in their curriculum and engagement in which they, along with their students, exchange important narratives that provide context for complex, fluid, and important lives” (p. 261). Regarding narrative, the literature provided me with important considerations for honoring the stories of my participants and accurately presenting the lived experiences of the English educators in my study as they attempt to become antiracist English teachers.

Becoming Antiracist: A Never Ending Journey

Falter et al. (2020) offered, “As Michelle Obama reminds us in her memoir *Becoming*, becoming isn’t about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim. I see it instead as forward

motion, a means of evolving, a way to reach continuously toward a better self. The journey doesn't end" (p. 18). A sentiment that was unanimously held among the scholarly literature was that becoming antiracist is a process, the process was described as ongoing, never ending, and continuous (Falter et al., 2020; Lensmire et al., 2013; McManimon & Casey, 2018; Neville, 2020; Rolón-Dow et al., 2021; Sinclair, 2018; Tanner, 2019). Just as racial literacy is "an ongoing inquiry process that facilitates the exploration of questions, encourages re-reading of texts, and values the reading of unfamiliar texts" (Rolón-Dow et al., 2021, p. 672), becoming antiracist English teachers and using antiracist teaching practices also require an ongoing commitment from those who answer the call and pledge to do the work. Even as the literature on antiracist teaching offered many suggestions of steps or methods to becoming anti-racist English teachers, none characterized the action required as a road map that takes one from the beginning to a determined end (Neville, 2020). Even Falter et al. (2020) who offered a structured set of steps, encouraged those attempting to become antiracist to "repeat" their step-by-step approach over and over again so the process never ends.

Instead of presenting studies where participants arrived at a destination, researchers offered a starting point or place to begin a journey to becoming an anti-racist educator (Casey & McManimon, 2021; Johnson, 2018; Lensmire, 2013; Rolón-Dow et al., 2021; Skerrett, 2008). Therefore, becoming antiracist and implementing antiracist teaching practices is not the stuff of a one time or even a series of professional development experiences (Casey & McManimon, 2021; Rolón-Dow et al., 2021). In their study of teacher candidates, Rolón-Dow et al. (2021) posited, "becoming an anti-racist teacher is not a linear process" and "teacher candidates need to be repeatedly guided and supported as they develop concepts, practice new skills, and reflect on their efforts to address race and racism" (p. 671). Neville (2020) found the same true of

participants in her study of preservice teachers. She confirmed that “racial literacy scholars argue that one can never ‘arrive’ at an antiracist state of existence. Instead, one must continually sit in the uncomfortable, indeterminate process of becoming” (p. 379). The word becoming characterizes attempts to be antiracist as an evolution, a continuous journey with no set beginning or set ending.

Although much of the literature focused on preservice teachers, it is not too late for practicing teachers to attempt to become antiracist educators (Kinloch & Dixon, 2017), particularly veteran teachers who are far removed from their teacher education programs or whose teacher education programs did not prepare them for antiracism in the first place (Thomas, 2015). McManimon and Casey (2018) corroborated, “we are always in the process of becoming antiracist pedagogues; the moment we think we have ‘arrived’ is the moment at which we have stopped learning and thus stopped our most important teaching” (p. 396). Therefore, as the literature advised, my commitment to becoming antiracist was a commitment that will go way beyond the parameters of this study, I am undertaking a continuous journey without end.

Summary of the Literature

The study of the literature pertaining to antiracist teaching for English educators and in English classrooms helped situate my study by identifying the need for teachers to take action. The literature underscores the call to action that has come from all over the country from many different voices by identifying the necessity of antiracist work in schools, suggesting ways to go about the work, and highlighting the difficulties educators encounter doing this work. As the study began, I continued to read and educate myself about antiracism. Through my reading, academic and otherwise, I found that in the midst of our post pandemic society and with the next presidential election looming ahead, ways to work against racism in schools and society are

evolving. In 2023 Skerrett and Smagorinsky (2023) and Bettina Love (2023) among others released books focused on education that alert teachers to the nuanced and changing ways to do antiracist work in the troubled times in which we are living.

Overall, a study of the literature on antiracist English teaching revealed three overarching ideas that are necessary for any teacher engaging in antiracist and social justice practices. 1. Teachers will have to grapple with their own identities, ideologies, stories, and histories; 2. Teachers will have to commit to centering race and move beyond acknowledgement to action against individual and institutional forms of racism; and 3. Teachers will have to move forward from where they are and embark on an endless journey of becoming. With these understandings in mind, I began the study with an inquiry group of social justice minded English teachers who were willing to examine their identities and practices and who were committed to work toward becoming antiracist English educators. The ongoing nature of an antiracist journey, the sheer difficulty of the work, and the many suggested ways to be antiracist, were considerations that impacted the design of this study. These considerations coupled with my desire to focus on English teacher practices, my need to do feminist research with participants instead of on them (Leavy & Harris, 2019), and my curiosity to know how other English teachers from different contexts were taking antiracist action, lead me to choose a feminist practitioner action research methodology.

Chapter 3: Methodology

To study the call to action I answered and the commitment I made to becoming antiracist required a methodology that could capture a journey to becoming antiracist. While I was questioning, what can I do? Johnson (2020) suggested for people to take action, “It will be found in your earnest willingness to dismantle systems that stand in our way” (para. 10). As an English teacher the system that I saw standing in the way of equity and social justice was public education. Therefore, I wanted to use my position as an English teacher to examine my own practice within my classroom and in the context of a public school. Such an examination of a teacher’s practice is practitioner action research (PAR). Practitioner action research falls under the larger umbrella of action research and is a type of participatory action research. Under this umbrella teachers as practitioners study their own classrooms. Ravitch (2014) said of practitioner research: “Such systematic examination is designed to increase awareness of the contexts that shape professional actions, decisions, and judgments, enabling practitioners to see our practices anew,” (p. 6). Often teacher research begins with dissatisfaction, a concern about practice (Bound & Stack, 2012; Kemmis et al., 2014), or a puzzling question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), which was the case for my study, when I began to question my practice during the summer of 2020 and wonder, is what I was doing enough? As I attempted to answer that question, it occurred to me that the most effective way to be a coconspirator, one who moves beyond allyship to take action (Love, 2019), was by examining my own teaching practice and to make changes.

In addition to my desire to take action, I questioned if other English teachers were answering the call. I understood that practitioner action research as a methodology does not have to be done alone. It can be “practitioner inquiry” or “collaborative action research” where

teachers form groups which put teachers in the role of co-researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 54). In lieu of studying students, the emphasis in practitioner research is on “the voice of collaborative teacher groups” and the “unfolding knowledge and professional development in the teacher’s practice” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 54). Therefore, I formed a teacher inquiry circle with a group of English teachers who were self-proclaimed teachers for social justice and who like me were committed to antiracism. In the group we used inquiry, reflection, and storytelling to examine, make sense of, and attempted to improve our practices, classrooms, and schools.

In this chapter, I define feminist practitioner action research and describe the teacher inquiry group that I formed to answer my research questions:

- How can a group of English teachers in an inquiry circle actively work to disrupt the structures, policies, institutions, and systems that act as barriers and preserve race-based inequities in their classrooms?
- What are the lived experiences of English teachers from a variety of contexts as they attempt to become antiracist teachers in the English classrooms where they teach through a teacher inquiry group?

I also explain why I chose to use an inquiry circle as the vehicle for studying the lived experiences of English teachers becoming antiracist as they attempted to disrupt race-based inequities in their classrooms. Followed by how that circle became a brave space for sharing our stories, our antiracist actions, and our lives, and how I recruited the participants who joined the teacher inquiry circle and allowed me to do the research with them as collaborators. In the next section, I present is the importance of context in the study. I present the larger context of New Jersey followed by the individual contexts of each inquiry circle member. Next, I focus on the tensions of being a practitioner and a researcher and one who is doing antiracist work from my

positionality as a white woman. Then I present the method for collecting and analyzing data and the trustworthiness of the study. Finally, I conclude the chapter with the narrative of how I formed the teacher inquiry group. This may sound like an paradox, that I end with the beginning of our journey. I want to capture how the inquiry circle was formed in its messy nonlinear way and do so in a humanizing way, by telling our story.

Feminist Practitioner Action Research

As I identify as a feminist, my feminism informed my research in that feminist research requires, “the researcher to situate her personal, political, intellectual, theoretical, and autobiographical selves during all stages of research” (Leavy & Harris, 2019, p. 103). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) identified five themes that underscore the practitioner research movement. Two of these themes are relevant to the feminist study I conducted: Taking on issues of equity, engagement, and agency, and inventing and reinventing communities of inquiry. In practitioner research, like the practitioner action research the teacher inquiry group I formed engaged in, teacher researchers “grapple with issues of social justice in their particular schools” putting these issues “front and center” and “often connect geographically dispersed and distinctive local sites” acknowledging that and perhaps precisely because “equity issues vary from site to site” (p. 13). In these ways, feminist practitioner action research was an apt method to conduct research about becoming antiracist English teachers. Its focus on teachers as practitioners, its attention to action and reflection, and its allowance for multiple sites of inquiry and its need of collaboration (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), all spoke to me as a feminist researcher and coincided with the goals described in the statement of purpose, to study the lived experiences of English teachers who were attempting to become antiracist.

Therefore, I used practitioner action research to guide my study through a feminist critical research frame. For feminists, the purpose of research is to inform social change and “from a theoretical perspective, such research studies are informed by critical theory” (Leavy & Harris, 2018, p. 29) like the intersectional feminism and feminist pedagogy I discuss later in this chapter in my positionality statement, being a feminist cannot be separated from my work as an educator. Leavy and Harris (2019) suggested there are four central ideas for feminists doing action research: “a commitment to process, consensus, building relationships out of a common cause, and working collaboratively to achieve common agendas” (p. 164). As a feminist and an advocate for social justice, action research in this case practitioner action research was appealing to me as it adheres to a transformative paradigm. The transformative paradigm is a social justice approach to research that “posits that research should be empowering, emancipatory, and transformative (in whatever ways are possible)” (Leavy & Harris, 2019, p. 160). This paradigm allowed for the action of the practitioners in the group to be more dynamic in lieu of a more traditional plan-act-observe-reflect-cycle (Jenkins et al., 2019; Kemmis et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The group worked in solidarity with a common goal of becoming antiracist, on a nonlinear journey that required an open, flexible, and reflexive method of research.

The feminist practitioner action research I conducted was nonlinear and much messier than a traditional cycle of inquiry. It allowed the inquiry into our practices and ourselves to be inductive and emergent (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Kemmis et al., 2014). Jenkins et al. (2019) described an approach to action research as a “design study to collect data to inform change” this approach was suitable for “more reflective learners” (p. 1) which fit perfectly with the participants in this study of English teachers becoming antiracist. The research could then focus attention on other aspects of the problem of race in schools, like attempts to “challenge

power relations based on societal structures of race, class, sexual orientation, or religion” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 56) which the findings will show.

Although being a feminist was not a requirement for participants in this study. All of the participants described themselves as social justice-oriented teachers and they were “Profoundly interested in their practices, in whether they understand their practices and the consequences of their practices, and in whether the conditions under which they practice are appropriate” (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 6), precisely what practitioner action research to study English teachers attempting to become antiracist educators in their own individual context required. For myself as a feminist researcher I saw this research as a form of feminist praxis. Jenkins et al. (2019) wrote:

Feminist praxis can be summarized as follows: praxis (that is, the performance of an action) inspired by a belief system drawing on principles of mutual nurturing and care, non-violence, and collective action where small groups work for change, paying attention to the importance of community, reciprocity, self-reflection, and personal development over time. (p. 425)

While designing this research study, I considered what methodology would make the most sense for me as a feminist and social justice advocate who desired to take some action individually but did not want to do this work alone. Feminist practitioner action research fulfilled all of my requirements. I needed to consider how best to do justice to my participants and the topic of antiracism in secondary English classrooms considering my positionality. I wanted to consider my personal journey overall but particularly the heightened desire for change and more pointed questioning of my teaching practice sparked by the activism of the summer of 2020. My journey as a doctoral researcher living and teaching during a global pandemic, and within the milieu of a changing school and sociopolitical climate, all profoundly impacted the decisions I

made for this doctoral research study. All I learned, read, and experienced within this backdrop lead me to design this feminist practitioner action research study. My particular desire to do antiracist work collaboratively, took the form of practitioner inquiry in a teacher inquiry group.

Collaborative Inquiry: A Different Kind of Professional Learning Community

Collaboration is a key component of practitioner action research (Bound & Stack, 2012) and for doing antiracist work in schools as, “Collaboration isn’t cheating in this work—it’s a powerful and necessary tool of resistance” (Picower, 2021, p. 80). However, all collaboration is not equal. It is important to note that the community I gathered was a community of inquiry and I called our collaborative teacher inquiry group an inquiry circle, which I explain in more detail in the next section. This community differed from the professional learning communities (PLCs) that have become common in education reform and professional development movements (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). There were similarities between PLCs and the practitioner inquiry group, but there were also important and distinct differences. PLCs are used within schools to address gaps in performance and often use assessment data to plan ways for improving student learning outcomes within an accountability framework (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019). There is nothing wrong with these aims; practitioner inquiry groups are concerned with improving student learning as well. The difference lies in the focus of the teacher inquiry group which was much broader and went beyond accountability and student improvement. By comparison the teacher inquiry group could focus on a wide range of ways to improve learning, social movements like antiracism, and contexts for change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). To that end, “teachers jointly build knowledge by examining artifacts of practice, but they also interrogate their own assumptions, construct new curricula, and engage with others in a search for meaning in their work lives” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 55). For this study, a teacher

inquiry group was much more aligned to the goals of teachers in the process of becoming antiracist. Within the group we were more open and able to question, discuss, and tell stories with the goal of examining our practices and our lives. The fact that we met outside of school and on our own time was a contributing factor to our freedom.

In response to Johnson's (2020) call for a correct response to injustice against people of color, this teacher inquiry group was more than just a book club. Within the teacher inquiry group participants, all teachers of English, were concerned with their own learning, their own identity, and their own practices as an action that can be taken against racism in schools. The group engaged in "inquiry or question and problem posing as a central way to know about and improve teaching, learning, and schooling" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). It was within our individual and shared inquiry and the subsequent understanding of our roles as teachers and activist working against institutional racism in schools that we came to understand both the power and the lack of power we had to enact change (Picower, 2021; Simon, 2015).

An Inquiry Circle: The Power of Circle Processes

Pulling from restorative justice and peacemaking circle traditions (de los Rios et al., 2019; Winn, 2013), the community of inquiry I formed was an inquiry circle of social justice-oriented educators who wanted to collaboratively look at our own identities, practices, curriculums, and contexts and work toward becoming antiracist educators. I chose a circle practice (Pranis, 2005) because I saw the circle as symbolic of a never-ending cycle where strength can be drawn from the community as we did the difficult work of becoming. These were not idealistic or romanticized ideals; peacemaking circles are powerful and productive and although usually intended for conflict resolution, were relevant here because circles, like our teacher inquiry circle, are based on inquiry, collaboration, and community building (Winn,

2013). Community building was a natural and crucial aspect to the formation and continued collaboration of this group and the attributes of restorative justice circles such as collaboration and community building transferred well to the antiracist work we were attempting to do (Winn, 2013). Within circle processes like peacemaking circles, hierarchies are minimized, and all members of the circle have equal opportunity to be seen, heard, and contribute, taking on the equally important roles of speaker and listener (Winn, 2013). Although I was the initiator of the study, all members of the group acted as speakers and listeners for one another, in the circle we shared our stories and experiences and our successes and frustrations with becoming antiracist.

Additionally, a focus on inquiry proved to be productive for the teacher inquiry circle. Inquiry is a highly effective tool for teachers to examine and improve their teaching practice. Darling-Hammond and Oakes (2019) identified that “an emphasis on inquiry contributes to the development of multiple deeper learning competencies for teachers and students” (p. 119) and cited collaboration among teachers who “share practices, develop plans together, and solve problems collectively” (p. 123) as essential for those who are learning to teach as well as practicing teachers. In their study, de los Rios et al. (2019) presented a group of “activist-oriented scholars” who applied restorative justice to English teacher education. They explained, “Collectively these scholars challenge the hegemony of what counts as English language and English education, and importantly acknowledge and make clear the harm imposed by traditional ELA teaching practices” (p. 363). Their study, like my study of the teacher inquiry circle, highlighted the importance of collaborative inquiry and what actions can be accomplished by English teachers who worked together toward a common goal.

Focusing on inquiry was also a humanizing way to conduct research, especially the difficult and incredibly personal study of the lived experiences of English teachers who want to

use antiracist teaching in their English classrooms to bring about change. As Freire (1970) stated: “For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 72). Freire (1970) described inquiry as a function of being human and, like peacemaking circles, hopeful (Winn, 2013). What was learned from conducting FPAR using restorative justice and circle traditions was that power sharing is possible, collaboration is crucial, and transformation can happen (Winn, 2013) and borrowing from these traditions improved the ability of the teacher inquiry circle of English teachers who came together as strangers from different contexts, to do the difficult relentless work of becoming antiracist.

Brave Spaces Instead of Safe Spaces. Within this inquiry circle, we had difficult and consciousness-raising conversations about race, racism, whiteness, and white supremacy which produce varying degrees of discomfort, anxiety, and emotional burden for members of the group. As already established, discomfort is part of the work that needs to be done by educators who wish to become antiracist (Casey & McManimon, 2021; Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Without discomfort, no growth or learning can take place. From the beginning when as a group we set our community agreements or norms we reframed ourselves as risk takers and the group itself not just a safe space but a brave space (Arao & Clemmens, 2013). Much like Love’s (2019) shift from ally to coconspirator, the act of renaming gave the group and its members a more accurate representation, but renaming alone did not guarantee the group would be a brave space.

The teacher inquiry group became brave through our willingness to be vulnerable and our shared purpose and commitment to the work of becoming antiracist. Navarro (2020) followed

hooks's (2005) suggestion that "engaged and humanizing pedagogy" of which antiracist teaching is, "requires mutual vulnerability that requires educators to model the 'risk-taking' in sharing narratives that enhance the learning of academic material" (p. 161). As a group we had to become risk takers and engage in discomfort if we hoped for any change to take place in our individual classrooms or schools (Love, 2019). Doing antiracist work across communities instead of in a white affinity group required us to center race. In the study we could not be colorblind. Our experiences as white women and women of color were different and our responses to and understanding of racism were different as well. Part of the purpose of this group was to practice having difficult but necessary conversations about race(ism) in order to apply antiracist and racial literacy practices with students and in classrooms. The findings will show that the teacher inquiry group did use each other as a sounding board and outside of our context we found a space to voice what we could not always say in our schools.

Although discomfort in antiracist work is necessary, the group was cognizant of not inflicting intentional harm, as Arao and Clemmens (2013) warned, "violence of any kind—physical, emotional, and psychological—is antithetical to the aims of social justice work" (p. 139). Winn (2013) furthered, "One can never guarantee a safe space even in seemingly homogeneous contexts" (p. 133). Although the members of the inquiry circle were all social justice-oriented individuals, each collaborator brought their own identities, perspectives, bias, and personalities into the group. Therefore, each participant had the potential to feel or inflict harm and like race our differences and that potential for harm had to be acknowledged from the beginning in order to open up a brave space for collaboration.

Finding Participants to Be Members of the Teacher Inquiry Circle

The criteria for participants for this study was fairly specific, I was looking to recruit secondary English teachers who were currently working in high schools in New Jersey. I wanted to work with practicing teachers who ideally had at least five years of teaching experience and came from a variety of contexts within the state. Context referred to racial, economic, and geographic factors. I was also looking for teachers who identified as teachers for social justice. I wanted teachers who, like me, were already doing social justice work but wanted to add antiracist teaching to their repertoire. It was not my intention to educate about or convince anyone to be antiracist. I was looking for English teachers to join me on my journey to help me understand what it means to be antiracist. I wanted people who were already inclined to the work. In the flyer I used for recruitment I stated, “Participants in the study will form a social justice-oriented teacher inquiry group to discuss antiracism and antiracist teaching practices in the English classroom and I asked for perspective participants, who are interested in teaching for social justice and equity particularly antiracist teaching practices.” It was my intention that members of the inquiry circle would be like-minded and already have some knowledge of and desire to do social justice work.

To find my participants, I used a snowball or network sampling method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through this purposeful sampling method, I was sure I could identify participants through contacts within my circle of teachers, colleagues, and fellow doctoral students and asked them to identify other possible participants (Leavy & Harris, 2019). The teachers I met at a two week Institute for Social Justice (a pseudonym) during the summer of 2021 were able to connect me with their colleagues that they knew to be teachers for social justice. From this group I was able to recruit three English educators who were willing to embark on the journey to becoming with me.

I had anticipated having a small sample of 4–6 participants in the study due to its specificity. Just as the teacher in me believes a smaller class size almost always produces a closer and more productive environment in which to learn, I did not consider a small sample size as a detriment to this study. I saw it as an advantage. Due to the personal nature of the study and the commitment necessary of the participants to explore their identities and privileges the small group made it more comfortable, and easier to share and form a community.

I was more mindful of the practitioner action research methodology I wanted to engage in and wanted individuals interested in social justice and examining their teaching practices. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested this methodology required (English) teachers who were “‘profoundly interested’ in their practice” and care deeply about their community (p. 56). In the plea, I framed participation in this study, or more importantly in this teacher inquiry circle as a call to action for English teachers who want to engage in the process of becoming antiracist educators. Abby, Ashni, and later Alyssa answered the call and became members of the teacher inquiry circle. In an effort to maintain confidentiality as is common in qualitative research, I used pseudonyms for the three participants and for the schools where they teach, and I eliminated other possible identifiers such as the names of the towns where they grew up.

Although much of what I read in the literature was about white women teachers, the teacher inquiry group included two teachers of color in our group of four. I discuss the benefits of doing antiracist work across communities in Chapter 4. For now, I note that the identities and positionality of the individual teachers played a crucial role in the study of how English teachers attempt to become antiracist educators. Members of the inquiry circle came to the group with different identities and were at different points in their antiracist journeys and because the path to becoming antiracist is nonlinear and has no end. Therefore, where they were on the journey, and

their journey forward, were an important part of our story. In Chapter 4, I also go into detail presenting each member of the inquiry circle, their histories, their stories, and the actions they attempt to take in becoming antiracist. In this next section, I examine the importance of context and identify the varying contexts of our different schools within New Jersey, studying teachers from a variety of contexts added to the uniqueness of our individual journeys.

The Importance of Context

There is much evidence that antiracist work is highly contextual (Borsheim-Black, 2015; Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Neville, 2020a; Rolón-Dow et al., 2021; Skerrett, 2011) and teachers of English, particularly those who attempt to teach with social justice goals in mind need to acknowledge the varying school contexts where they find themselves and consider the diverse student populations in which to do the work (Lee, 2005; Neville, 2020a; Rolón-Dow et al., 2021). Neville (2020a), who wrote about being a white English teacher in the city of Detroit, specifically suggested there is value in examining spatial and geographical aspects of the schools in order to focus on race and antiracism in highly contextualized ways. Casey and McManimon (2021) found that their work “both collectively and individually, was hyper-contextual, situated within actual building politics, curriculum, and geography, as well as in our own stories and histories and bodies” (p. 207), their work highlighted the importance of individual contexts.

In her book, *Up Against Whiteness: Race School and Immigrant Youth*, Lee (2005) noted that “little has been written about the experiences of immigrants of color in ‘good’ schools” as opposed to all of the literature from “poorly funded schools with bad reputations” (p. 2) a trend indicative of much of the literature about school reform. I teach in a “good” but racially, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse school. It was due in part to this gap in research that prompted me to conduct this study with other schools in New Jersey. Although, I felt that

factors including its socioeconomic makeup and its high rates of achievement make my school a valuable site for examination; it was only one site within New Jersey, a state with a diverse make-up but segregated schools, which made New Jersey public schools ripe for closer examination (Arundel, 2022; Clark, 2018).

Mohanty (2003) in her work with the “cross-border feminist community” used the term “common differences” and described the need for solidarity among women from different countries with different perspectives but all struggle “in the face of unequal power relations” (p. 504). In this way, struggling against the common cause of racism in schools, teachers from varying contexts working collaboratively became a strength. Collaboration is a key component of teacher inquiry (Simon, 2015) and the feminist practitioner action research design of this study (Bound & Stack, 2012). Simon and Campano (2013) described teacher activists and their research as “frequently connected to nested communities of practice, within and across classrooms, schools, neighborhoods, or universities” (p. 26). This study brought together English teachers from a variety of contexts in New Jersey which allowed the teacher inquiry circle to work across schools and provided a space for inquiry and collaboration.

A valid concern of working across schools and contexts may be that English teachers will not find value in working toward becoming antiracist outside of their own contexts, knowing practices that are transformative in one district most likely will not be in another. However, the focus of the group was on shared inquiry not necessarily shared actions. I acknowledge that the lack of action taken across context was a limitation of the study. The findings show that a study such as this one, where teachers worked alongside one another, was a beneficial endeavor. The teacher inquiry circle drew from the collaboration and community the group formed and focused on the shared goal of fighting racism. Our collaboration, which is not the norm even within

individual schools, highlighted the isolated nature of the teaching profession, where teachers work behind closed doors, or within a teacher's room, a building, and even district without much collaboration within or between contexts (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019; Simon, 2015). Although becoming antiracist is a personal ongoing context specific process, the findings will show that journeying together in solidarity was a valuable way for the teacher inquiry group to proceed. The varying contexts in which we practiced were not completely separate, they were connected by the larger context of teaching and doing antiracist work in the context of New Jersey secondary schools.

The Larger Context: New Jersey

Based on statistical data, a focus on New Jersey schools provided a variety of contexts in a state where race is inextricable from schools and housing is tightly bound to which school districts students attend. In fact, “almost 25 percent of New Jersey schools are ‘desperately segregated,’ with student enrollment more than 90 percent white or more than 90 percent non-white” (Clark, 2018, para. 6) and “nearly 50% of Black students across the state attended schools where fewer than 10% of students were White” (Arundel, 2022, para. 4). It is not surprising that based on the racial makeup of schools New Jersey was considered the sixth most segregated state in the nation. These dismal statistics have prompted a bill to be introduced into New Jersey legislation to create a Division of School Desegregation within the State Department of Education. The purpose of the bill was to battle de facto segregation in the state and improve racial and socioeconomic equity (Arundel, 2022). The need for such a department speaks volumes about the state of New Jersey schools and their appropriateness as sites to study antiracism and antiracist teaching practices. These varying populations of students all deserve

and require a more equitable, socially just schooling experience, but the ways to accomplish this goal are different in different contexts.

In addition to statistics about students, according to the New Jersey Department of Education, only 16% of teachers in the state are nonwhite and the number of nonwhite teachers in many districts is far less (Guenther, 2020). These numbers will be confirmed by varying degrees in the individual context of the inquiry circle group members. These numbers do not currently reflect the diversity of the state or the country nor is the discrepancy between the race of teachers and the students in their charge likely to change any time soon (Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Villegas et al., 2012). In the field of teacher education, faculty are approximately 78% white and in 2014 the percentage of white candidates pursuing graduate degrees in education nationally was 72% (Picower, 2021). These statistics underscore the need to look closely at context and to acknowledge the overwhelming whiteness of the profession.

When I offer the racial and ethnic make up the schools in the study, I am aware of the problematic ways the students are categorized by the NJ School Performance Report, this report uses broad terms like Asian which does not reflect the actual diversity of the group, and Hispanic which Colomer (2019) offered, “Whether Hispanic or Latinx, these words confine members within a frame of socially constructed characteristics, and create an equally artificial population into which millions disappear” (p. 2). Regardless of the insufficient ways the students are categorized by the state’s performance report, these categories were used as the available data on school demographic information which identified the context in one way but did not give a full picture of the students who attend these schools. In addition, the study was not conducted within these schools per se, so the data I provide serves as a backdrop only to give an understanding of

where the teachers in the inquiry circle were attempting to do antiracist work. I also use pseudonyms in place of the names of the schools in the interest of confidentiality.

As previously noted, antiracist work is not universal, it is highly contextual (Borsheim-Black, 2015; Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Neville, 2020a; Rolón-Dow et al., 2021; Skerrett, 2011). Therefore, a criticism of the study of English teachers from a variety of contexts in New Jersey may be that the findings are not generalizable. However, context, in all of its racial, social, political, and economic complexity, was extremely important to this study, teachers becoming antiracist did not happen in a vacuum, this journey was impacted by the context which was reflected in the design of this study and the lived experience of the participants. In research, context can traditionally be seen as a variable for which to control, Anderson and Scott (2012) argued, “context is seen as a nuisance rather than intrinsic to the phenomenon under study” (p. 675) and in practitioner action research, “practitioners are regarded as generators of knowledge that is usable in, and often beyond the local context” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 56). The English teachers in this study acknowledged the varying and unique school contexts where they taught and considered the diverse student populations with whom they were working as we contemplated our efforts to become antiracist in the inquiry circle which was what the literature directed us to do (Lee, 2005; Neville, 2020a; Rolón-Dow et al., 2021).

Studying various contexts, including my own, provided a fuller insight into the lived experiences of English teachers becoming antiracist. The varying contexts in New Jersey also highlighted the unique challenges of becoming antiracist teachers in different contexts. An important part of my personal journey required that I look closely at my own positionality and the diverse student population in the context where I currently teach. An important part of my questioning was how my context related to, not compared with, the contexts of the other

practitioners in the teacher inquiry circle. In the next section I present my local context and that of the other members of the teacher inquiry group to show where we were teaching and attempting antiracist work during the study.

The Local Contexts of Members of the Teacher Inquiry Circle

All of the data for the local contexts comes from the 2012–2022 NJ School Performance Report. I present the name and location of the school, the enrollment, the number of students who are economically disadvantaged and the home languages spoken by students as race intersects with other factors (Love, 2019; Winn, 2018). Then I give the racial and ethnic breakdown of the students, teachers, and administrators and English teacher specifically.

These statistics are additional background information and do not give a full picture of the schools. By neoliberal standards (i.e.: standardized testing, graduation rates, number of students who go on to four-year colleges) being listed as a Top High School by *U.S. News and World Reports* and with 41.7% of students enrolled in at least one Advanced Placement (AP) class by these accounts and measures William McKinley can be considered academically successful (NJ School Performance Report). However, looking at the daily instruction and knowing the curriculum is geared toward the Western literary canon and privileges a white, Christian, cisgendered audience, not the actual group who walk the halls of McKinley daily highlighted how mere statistics cannot give a full picture of the classroom interactions and experiences of the teachers and their students.

William McKinley High School: My Context. William McKinley is a diverse high school with an enrollment of just over 1,300 in central New Jersey where 25.1% of students in the school are categorized as economically disadvantaged and more than half of the students speak a home language other than English. While the top languages spoken were Spanish 14.6

%, Gujarati 13.5%, Urdu 6.1%, and 4.0% Hindi the percentage of students who spoke other languages, meaning less than 1% of students speak these languages, is 16.1% which speaks to the tremendous amount of linguistic diversity at the school. The racial and ethnic breakdown was categorized as: 17.4% White, 26.9% Hispanic, 7.9% Black or African American, 46.8% Asian, and 0.9% two or more races. The racial and ethnic background of teachers was 90.4% white, 4.3% Hispanic, 3.5% Black or African American and 1.7% Asian, and for Language Arts teachers specifically it was 87.5% white and 12.5% Black or African American.

Rollings High School: Ashni's Context. Rollings is a suburban high school in south New Jersey with an enrollment of 848 students in grades 9–12 and 14.6% of students were considered economically disadvantaged and 96.6% speak English as their home language, 2.2% speak Spanish and 1.2% other languages. The racial and ethnic background of the students was 78.1% white, 13.8% Hispanic, 2.5% Black or African American, 3.1% Asian, 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 2.3% two or more races. Teachers at the school were 94.4% white, 3.7% Hispanic, and 1.9% Asian. There were no Black or African American teachers at the school, 100% of the administrators were white, and 100% of the Language Arts teacher were white.

Adams Middle School: Abby's Context. Adams is a suburban middle school in south New Jersey with an enrollment of 646 students in grades 6–8 where 25.3% of the school is considered economically disadvantaged. The home languages of the students at Adams were 89.2% English, 7.4% Spanish, and 3.4% other. The student enrollment by racial and ethnic group was 56.0% white, 20.7% Hispanic, 11.2% Black or African American, 6.1% Asian, 0.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 5.7% are two or more races. The staff at Adams was 97.5% White, 1.3% Hispanic, and 1.3% Black or African American, 100% of the Administrators in the

school were white and 100% of the Language Arts teachers were white. Later in the study Abby transferred to Marsh high school with an enrollment of 1,110 students and the racial and ethnic background was almost identical. At Marsh the administrators were 75.0% white and 25% Black or African American, the teachers were 90% white, 5.2% Hispanic, 1.0% Black or African American, 2.1% Asian and 1.0% two or more races.

Hudson High School: Alyssa's Context. Hudson is a suburban high school in central New Jersey with an enrollment of 748 students in grades 9–12 where 25.5% of the students were considered economically disadvantaged. The home languages of the students at Hudson were 42.4% English, 31.3% Spanish, 21.4% Portuguese, 1.1% Ukrainian, and 3.9% other languages. The student enrollment by racial and ethnic background was 45.6% white, 44.3% Hispanic, 6.0% Black or African American, 1.7% Asian, 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 0.1% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 2.1% two or more races. The racial and ethnic background of teachers was 87.5% white, 1.8% Hispanic, 3.6% Black or African American, 5.4% Asian, and 1.8% two or more races. At Hudson 100% of administrators were white. The Language Arts teachers were 66.7% white, 16.7% Asian, and 16.7% two or more races.

My Role as a Practitioner Researcher

My role as practitioner researcher was fraught with tensions as was the research itself. I had to contend with the liberating and oppressive nature of English as a subject. I had to navigate the tension between creating a brave space but acknowledging that antiracist work is inherently uncomfortable even in a community such as the teacher inquiry circle. I had to grapple with my positionality as a white woman and my complicity in the racist system as I attempted to become antiracist. In choosing practitioner action research I also had to contend with my dual role as researcher and practitioner/participant as I made decisions with and for the group.

Traditionally, being a participant in one's own research was seen as a negative due to a lack of objectivity. Ortlipp (2008) countered, "I am not an objective data-gathering tool!" (p. 698) and Leavy and Harris (2019) defended the insider role of a practitioner researcher, as feminists do not believe that research can ever be neutral, nor do they seek objectivity as a goal. Kemmis et al. (2014) argued the advantage of being an insider, "we believe that insiders have special advantages when it comes to doing research in their own sites and to investigating practices that hold their work and lives together in those sites" (p. 5). By creating a group of English teachers from various contexts, In some ways I lessen my role as lead researcher, as I was an insider in my own context but an outsider to the other contexts represented within the group. The role of insider and outsider allowed for the sharing of the power (Winn, 2018) as each participant was a researcher and expert of their own contexts and of their own lives.

Throughout the study, as I navigated these complexities, my purpose as a qualitative researcher remained constant. Luttrell (2010) explained, "qualitative researchers aim to transform the 'object' of their study into multi-dimensional and lively representations of lived experiences, social processes, and complex webs of meanings and values" (p. 160). A large portion of the study was the representation of our collective and individual journeys of becoming. This journey required participants, including myself, to think about and share their personal histories with race and privilege and their attempts to take antiracist actions.

As the head researcher, the one who sent out the plea and was gathering data, I needed to look critically at my own praxis, be brutally honest with myself and transparent about my positionality and how what I did in my practice may impact my students and what I did in the group could impact my collaborators. During the study, I spent a great deal of time reflecting in my researcher journal about how to approach each meeting and ways to share power within the

teacher inquiry circle. The use of circle processes helped me navigate this tension as all members of the circle were considered equal and had equal opportunity to speak, question, and lead (Pranis, 2005). It was the responsibility of all members of the teacher inquiry circle to create and maintain the non-judgmental but critical brave space where all members could examine themselves and their practices too. The use of circle processes and the nature of teacher inquiry groups as collaborative and community building experiences while members work towards a shared goal (Simon, 2015), helped to combat the inherent power dynamic between researcher and participant in the study. While I did supply the prompts, the Zoom links, the email and text reminders, and the agendas for the meetings. I like to think of those actions as me taking on the role of “keeper” in the inquiry circle, one who “Monitors the quality of the collective space and stimulates the reflections of the group through questions and topic suggestions” (Pranis, 2005, p. 12) not one who was a dominate voice or controlled the outcome of our meetings.

The final tension of being a practitioner researcher is my responsibility to present the research, the live experiences of the group members including myself, in an honest, accurate, and trustworthy manner. In a study such as this one, much depended on me as the researcher to make decisions about what to present in my findings and how to present these findings. I will discuss how I navigated this tension and trustworthiness later in the chapter. I do believe the decisions I made in designing, conducting, and presenting this research were closely tied to who I am as a person. In the next sections I will discuss my positionality and my history as a feminist and feminist researcher.

My Positionality as a White Intersectional Feminist Pedagogue and Researcher

Instead of letting race be a reason not to do antiracist work, Casey and McManimon (2020) added, “If we rely on preconceived notions of who is ‘supposed’ to engage in antiracist

work . . . we construct barriers to engaging in antiracism” (p. 204). In the current sociopolitical climate and with my desire to answer the call to action, it was my role as an educator, despite my position as a white woman, which necessitated my engagement in antiracist work. My feminist world view also contributed to my desire to take action. While many researchers attempt to eliminate biases within their studies, from my position as a feminist researcher, I understand that bias can only be acknowledged and abated but never eliminated (Leavy & Harris, 2019). Therefore, as a feminist researcher, race was central to my study of antiracism and my positionality was centered rather than ignored or excused (Leavy & Harris, 2019). This means I had to acknowledge that the women of color in the teacher inquiry group understood the work in ways that I simply could not.

In their ethnographic study of family history in North Carolina, Hughes and Willink (2014) described being unwittingly thrust together as co-researchers, “Hughes entered the project as a self-identifies ‘Black male local public schooled native ethnographer,’ while Willink entered the project as a self-identified ‘White female private-schooled educated Yankee” (p. 95). Through the opportunity to research together they offered, “We are learning the art of collaborating in compatible, diverse dyads at color line and beyond” (p. 111). Hughes and Willink discovered and then shared ways of using collaboration and critical dialogues to engage in research that will give a fuller picture of the participants in the ethnographic study and themselves. The advice I took from them was to be aware of “the response bias of your team member and yourself” and “to be open to being wrong, to changing, and to tolerating ambiguity” (p. 111). These lessons served me well as I engaged in research across communities with my collaborators.

Before the study began, in my position as a white woman teaching in a diverse setting, I recognized how I may harm my students (Baker-Bell, 2020; de los Rios et al., 2019; Love, 2019; Picower, 2021) and my desire to mitigate this harm was a consideration that led me to antiracism. Throughout the study I tried to be intentional and transparent about my role and my positionality, I wanted to conduct this research from the position of a co-conspirator, “which shifts the target of anti-racist action from individual people of Color to the unjust system, driving White people from charity to solidarity” (Picower, 2021, p. 17). Reframing my teacher and researcher roles to that of a co-conspirator redefined my antiracist work as a duty or responsibility for me as a teacher to address racism (Love, 2019; Picower, 2021; Wetzel, 2020).

My stance as a feminist pedagogue was central to the antiracist work I attempted to accomplish throughout the study. Feminist pedagogy can be used in classrooms to work toward transformation and change from within schools particularly in difficult times such as these (Rohrer, 2018). In my teaching practice, I have always attempted to use feminist and critical pedagogies as a means to teach for social justice and circumvent the institutional and structural barriers that prevent students from learning. It is this constant tension between enacting practices that are culturally relevant and student centered, valuing experience and transformative learning while resisting hierarchies of power within the structures and institutions of education that I have lived and practiced. Whereas these educational structures typically value a single voice, and promote white hegemonic, capitalistic, neoliberal, and patriarchal ideals, that are antithetical to feminist teaching practices (Rohrer, 2018). When I determined that what I had been doing was not enough, I turned my focus to antiracist practices in the English classroom as an extension of and a much-needed addition to the feminist pedagogical work I was already attempting.

I saw a kinship between the work of antiracism and feminist pedagogy as Ohito (2019) saw in her study of feminist teacher educators who identified as antiracist educators. I saw three points of commonality between feminist and antiracist teaching. The first is that feminist pedagogy, like antiracist teaching, is an alternative to traditional pedagogies (Crawley et al., 2008; Louise- Lawrence, 2014), “offer[ing] a challenge to mainstream pedagogical styles that can make women and other traditionally marginalized groups passive and invisible” (McCusker, 2017, p. 447). It requires a challenge to power structures and to the status quo (Love, 2019; Ohito, 2019; Picower, 2021). Second, since the phrase “the personal is political” was coined (Hanisch, 2006), feminist teachers are seen as engaging in political acts that are never neutral because they cannot separate the personal from their professional roles in the classroom. Similarly, antiracism, as Picower (2021) described, is “a stance instead of a box to check off” (p. 98). Being an antiracist educator begins with an examination of the self and requires shifts in personal beliefs and combatting personal and institutional bias (Casey & McManimon, 2021; Ebarvia, 2021; Neville, 2020; Utt & Tochluk, 2020). Finally, both antiracist teaching and feminist pedagogy require some action on the part of the teacher. Just as feminist pedagogues seek to transform learners and promote action (Crawley et al., 2008; Ellsworth, 1989; hooks, 2000) antiracist teaching is not passive or neutral (Casey & McManimon, 2018; 2021; Picower, 2021; Skerrett, 2008). While acknowledging the similarities and kinship between feminist pedagogy and antiracism was helpful as a way into the work, beyond the compatibility antiracism was the main focus of this initiative and needed to be treated as such. Therefore, my attempts at antiracist teaching practices were an addition to already existing critical pedagogies not a replacement of them (Johnson, 2018).

Despite the compatible concerns of feminist and antiracist teaching, focusing on becoming an antiracist English teacher allowed me to accomplish my feminist objectives in a more specific, determined, and intersectional way. I followed the lead of Ohito (2019), who examined feminist teacher educators who identified as antiracist and sought to understand “how those of us who identify as antiracist pedagogues teach (i.e., pedagogies, dispositions), as well what we teach (e.g., artifacts, texts), why we teach (e.g., motivations, ideological commitments), and who we teach” (p. 3). She examined these teachers knowing that she also had to include their experiences with race(ism) whether in the context of their family history, schooling experiences, and general embodiment (Ohito, 2019).

From the very beginning of the study, I recognized that as a white cis woman feminist educator and researcher, the lens that I needed to take up must be intersectional. Intersectional feminism supports understanding that social progress requires a look at “constellations of power relations of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, age, ability, and citizenship” (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 57). It is no secret that as feminism has progressed through the different waves; a consistent criticism of the movement has been its focus on white middle class women and their white middle class issues. More recently, Kendall (2020) critiqued mainstream white feminism for its continued focus on obtaining privilege for some and reminded feminists that basic needs and human rights issues are feminist issues. She offered, “Food insecurity and access to quality education, safe neighborhoods, a living wage, and medical are all feminist issues” (p. xiii) and Leavy and Harris (2019) explained that a misconception of feminist research is that it only cares about women when actually, “it holds explicit social commitments at the forefront. Beginning with the status of girls and women, but not ending there” (p. v). It was important for me as a white feminist researcher to acknowledge that feminist research as a field seeks to be

intersectional and for feminists the purpose of research is to inform social change (Leavy & Harris, 2019). Therefore, examining antiracism in the classroom was feminist work and although antiracist teaching was the focus of this study, race could not be extricated from other relational oppressions or identities of the teacher inquiry circle or the students we interacted with daily (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016).

In this study, I positioned myself as an intersectional feminist researcher because I recognized how many of the tenets of intersectionality resonate with the purposes of my study. Much like intersectionality, my study will examine praxis, within the overlapping space of theory and practice (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Similar to intersectional feminism, I attempted to trouble taken-for-granted knowledge, value and examine personal experiences and the lives of people, students, and educators, in all of their complexity (McCusker, 2017; Ringrose, 2018; Rohrer, 2018), and I framed the study as a call to action for participants to fight oppression. We can only truly fight against oppression when we recognize, as Love (2019) did, that “educational justice can happen only through a simultaneous fight for economic justice, racial justice, housing justice, environmental justice, religious justice, trans justice, citizenship justice, and disabilities justice” (p. 12), necessitating an intersectional view of the complex problem of race(ism) and antiracist teaching in schools. My intersectional feminism served as an additional analytical tool coupled with racial literacy to examine myself, my identity, my history, and my practice alongside the other English teachers in the teacher inquiry circle as we move through the process of becoming antiracist English teachers.

My Feminist Researcher History

In her book, *Just Research in Contentious Times: Widening the Methodological Imagination*, Fine (2018) asked researchers to trace the biography of their research questions.

She charged, “We have an obligation to ask, from where do our questions originate? And then we know, to whom we are accountable” (p. 1). When I think about my past and where I come from, I can see that I have been on a social justice trajectory for most of my life and my questions have originated from my experiences. My choice to become an educator itself makes me accountable to my students and to providing them with an equitable and just education.

In *The House on Mango Street*, Cisneros (1983) said, “You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are” (p. 105). For me it was Ogden Avenue where my parents, my two siblings, and I, lived on rent control in a railroad room apartment with no privacy on a dead-end street in Jersey City. When white flight began, we stayed behind in what became a culturally diverse predominantly Spanish speaking neighborhood. My parents, an Irish woman raised by a single mother in the projects of South Boston with eight siblings to care for and the first-born Italian son enjoying all the privilege this title implies, are complete opposites in all things, but were united in their concern for providing the basics: food on the table and a place to sleep, even if one had to share a bed. They met at the United Service Organization (USO) where mom volunteered and fell in love with a young sailor. When Dad was discharged from the Navy in 1965, they married and moved to the Garden State (my mom had high hopes) into the five-room apartment 1A they would inhabit for almost forty years.

When I was little, the backyard was lush and fragrant, overgrown with rows of tomato plants and other vegetables. The angry landlord, who yelled at us to be quiet in the hallway and would keep any balls that inadvertently found their way into his garden, would let the vegetables rot on the vine rather than share them with the inhabitants of his building. His wife would sneak some to my mother through the back window but when he caught her, she would pay the price.

The building had thin walls. He sold the building when I was about eight and the new owners paved the entire yard with asphalt and rented out parking spots behind a locked gate for a monthly fee. I attended the local Catholic school on partial scholarship in combination with housekeeping services rendered by my mother as a helper to the maid who worked for the priests in the rectory. An arrangement that was a constant source of embarrassment. Academically, I was assigned the same math teacher from fifth through eighth grade, unfortunately she was only certified in history and a substitute teacher helpfully informed me that whenever I opened my mouth people would know where I was from and that I was uneducated. These were my earliest memories of injustice. Men who beat women, landlords who disregarded their tenants, and schools that sent the message of our ignorance and lack of worth, loud and clear.

There is a lot more to my history: witnessing violence in high school, changing high schools in between sophomore and junior year, navigating the 1980s (a world dominated by men and sexual harassment), watching the deterioration of my neighborhood and our apartment and eventually its gentrification, being the first in my family to attend college but being woefully ill prepared, and also the positive influences in my life, growing up to love literature and learning, and surrounding myself with people who avoided drugs and trouble and hoped for a better future.

I offer this autobiographical view of myself not as an exemption or to excuse me from seeing my whiteness as a privilege and a force to do harm as DiAngelo (2018) warned against white fragility. Even if I endured difficult circumstances, I know full well that I have had opportunities that many others have not had. Like Picower (2021) who stated, “I share this brief summary of my journey, not to paint a portrait of myself as a ‘White exception’ but to show that particular experiences have the potential to disrupt certain ideologies of Whiteness” (p. 15). I

offer my past experiences as an honest assessment of where I have been and how it has shaped me personally and professionally.

My identity as a feminist woman, teacher, and researcher cannot be separated from where I am from and my personal history and all of my experiences both good and bad. In many ways my history has made me want to battle the status quo, notions of normalcy, and privilege and has sparked in me the need and desire to work toward education equity and social justice. Just as Esperanza is told in *The House on Mango Street*, “When you leave you must come back for the others, a circle, you understand? . . . You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you” (p. 105), I remember my roots and as Fine (2018) suggested “who I am accountable to” (p.1). Although my humble journey began on a dead-end street in Jersey City, it has prepared me to work toward being a coconspirator, one who conducts research for and with people who desire and deserve educational equity and justice.

Data Collection Methods

In this study that used a teacher inquiry group as the vehicle to do feminist practitioner action research with English teachers, the inquiry group itself was the main source of data. The entire point of the study was to document the journey of English teachers who want to become antiracist. As the literature suggested, this was an ongoing and continuous journey therefore the findings of this study revealed just a snapshot in time as members of the inquiry circle stepped into the work wherever they were in their ideologies and practice. I collected data from our journey for a specific period of time within the continuum, In this case, I documented the teacher inquire circle during the seven-month time frame of the study.

The teacher inquiry circle formed in August of 2021 when I began by having an initial introductory meeting to explain the study, its goals, the commitment, and most importantly to

begin to build community as the group I formed was a group of strangers. While this community building was an ongoing process, once the regularly scheduled meetings began the group turned to the work of becoming antiracist. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) stated, “When practitioners take their work as a site for inquiry, all sorts of questions emerge from all sorts of data and artifacts that not only represent but also shape and embody that work” (p. 56). In the inquiry circle we engaged in inquiry and questioning, identity work, storytelling, and discussions surrounding antiracism in schools and teaching practices as well as other social justice agendas. The group met nine times for approximately one hour each meeting over the course of seven months. I discuss the formation of the group in more detail in our story of becoming at the end of the chapter. During data collection and throughout all steps in the research process I kept a researcher journal. The meeting transcripts and the researcher journal were my main sources of data. These data sources were appropriate for this research methodology and directly connect to my research questions to examine the lived experiences and practices of English teacher who are becoming antiracist.

The ongoing nature of an antiracist journey led me to purposefully choose not to do any pre then post surveys. I believed pre and post implied that there was a before and an after to the work and that these conventional methods of data collection would go against all of the principles of doing the feminist, critical, and reflective, inquiry-based research I hope to accomplish. Although in hindsight I can see there would have been benefits to such pre and post surveys, the journey to becoming antiracist was such a unique and personal one it required more personal data. According to Brayboy et al. (2011, as quoted in Watanabe, 2014), “Stories constitute legitimate sources of data and justifiable ways of coming to know and understand that data” (p. 153). In the study of English teacher on a journey to become antiracist, I found that

personal storytelling was an integral part of the work of the teacher inquiry circle and a much richer data source from which to work.

Inquiry Circle Meetings: More than a Book Club

Meeting in an inquiry circle was an appropriate method for conducting feminist practitioner action research which required collaboration and gave participants the opportunity “to learn from each other’s experiences, thoughts, questions, ponderings, and ideas” (Bound & Stack, 2012, p. 1). Based on the review of literature and the research questions, this group was tasked with three central purposes: 1. To grapple with our own identities, ideologies, stories, and histories; 2. To examine our individual context and ways to disrupt the structures, policies, and barriers that implicitly or explicitly preserve race-based inequities in our classrooms; and 3. To answer the call to action by figuring out what it means to become antiracist and how we might incorporate antiracist practices in our classrooms. The goal of our meetings was not to come to a consensus about best practices or to design and implement specific lessons; it was to engage in a collective but personal journey of becoming.

Realistically, I knew that practicing teachers are busy people. Therefore, logistically it made sense to conduct group meetings virtually. Meeting virtually removed distance as a barrier to participation and allowed English teachers from other counties in the state of New Jersey the opportunity to participate and the virtual meetings eliminated the stress of traveling. I chose Zoom as an effective, cost free, and public tool to hold meetings. Within the Zoom platform, meetings were recorded and transcribed. These recordings and the meeting transcripts served as the data that were saved and later analyzed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I was transparent with the recordings and transcripts in that I made them available to all members of the group so they could review and reflect on the meetings if they wanted or needed to.

The meetings were somewhat structured in that I supplied an agenda. However, the agendas were broad and flexible. Typically, we began each meeting with a quick check in to acknowledge our mental health and ask, “are we ok?” Each member of the group was juggling full time teaching with family commitments, such as caring for children and Ashni’s and Alyssa’s children were quite young. After checking in we warmed up with a journal question or prompt to discuss, and then we moved on to our shared inquiry. Unexpectedly, a major part of our meetings turned out to be our critical storytelling. Flores Carmona and Luschen (2014) defined critical storytelling as:

Critical stories are those stories that speak to the constitution of experiences within a sociopolitical context (Barone, 1992), that acknowledge their development within historically situated conditions; and that recognize the gaps and silences in dominant ways of knowing and seek to illuminate counternarratives. (p. 1)

The stories the group told were not savior stories. The stories we shared were stories about our lives and our teaching. There were stories of self-doubt (did I say or do the right thing?) and stories of inquiry (why did this happen? or why do they think that? How will this impact the students?). In Chapter 4, I share some of our stories and detail what meaning was made from our critical storytelling.

I also share our difficult discussions about race, our schools, and our teaching practices. As we spoke, there were times that we struggled to find the words or choose our words carefully. When I presented these discussions, in the interest of clarity, I eliminated some of the ums, likes, and you knows, but other times I kept them because I felt these pauses were necessary to convey meaning and not just natural parts of an individual’s speech patterns. I based these decisions on the actual pauses in the audio recordings and the tone of the conversation. If someone was

searching for words, I kept these filler phrases in to show their thought process if these fillers interrupted meaning I eliminated them. All of the time I kept my goal to provide a full, nuanced, and accurate view of the teacher inquiry circle and its members.

Overall, the inquiry circle meetings were a collaboration of like-minded people who found a brave space to put into words their questions, frustrations, feelings, thoughts, and lived experiences. These meetings were not book club meetings where being at the meeting was the action, the data from the meetings will show the members of the teacher inquiry circle were committed to doing antiracist work and taking action in their schools, whatever actions were possible.

Journal Questions and Prompts

As English teachers, we had the tools of our trade at our disposal including narrative, descriptive, and autobiographical writing. However, the group did not feel that writing down their answers to questions or prompts was necessary. An important aspect of doing antiracist work is an understanding of the self and an examination of one's teaching practices which the group was able to do verbally.

Although I was originally reluctant to assign topics about which to journal, at the request of the group I did begin to prepare prompts for our discussion. These prompts were done at the beginning of each meeting as a way of preparing ourselves mentally and recentering the work. Sometimes two, three, or even four weeks would pass between meetings and the questions were a good way back into the work and to reconnect as a group. Most of the prompts were taken from, Singh (2019) *The racial Healing Handbook: Practical Activities to Help You Challenge Privilege, Confront Systematic Racism, & Engage in Collective Healing*. The purpose of these prompts/questions was to get the group thinking instead of assigning a task and this book struck

the right tone. As the group met on our own time after the school day it was not my intention to burden members with work to complete. I also liked the emphasis on healing and the way questions were geared to all people instead of those of one racial identity. In Table 1 I give a list of our meetings after our initial meeting in August, and the prompts that were used at each meeting.

Table 1

Meeting Dates and Prompts

Meeting dates and Discussion Prompts	
Meeting #1 – September 26, 2022	Meeting #5 – January 9, 2023
What about the classroom is liberating? about the English classroom is oppressive?	How do you approach discussing race/racism in your teaching?
Meeting #2 – October 20, 2022	Meeting #6 – January 23, 2023
Think back to the earliest time when you realized you had a racial identity. What do you remember?	What makes a teacher Antiracist? What attributes or qualities does an Antiracist teacher possess? What actions do they take?
Meeting #3 – October 24, 2022	Meeting #7 – February 6, 2023
Looking back at your school experiences, what conscious and unconscious messages did you learn about race?	How would you describe your role in working toward social and racial justice in your community(s)? Are you more of a helper, advocate, organizer, or rebel? Is this a good role for you? Has this role changed over time?

Meeting #4 – December 5, 2022	Meeting #8 – February 24, 2023
<p>Can you think of a time when you spoke up against something you believed was inappropriate or a time when you were silent?</p> <p>If you could do it over, would you change your actions?</p>	<p>When you think about your next steps what do you plan to do?</p>

Researcher Journal

Researcher journals are popular in qualitative research whereby a researcher keeps a journal in an effort to continually reflect on their decisions and the research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ortlipp, 2008). I used my researcher journal as a “way of making my history, values, and assumptions open to scrutiny” (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 698). In this way it was both reflective and critical of the journey and the decisions I am made throughout the study. I found my research journal invaluable and at times in the research process I wrote in the journal daily for a variety of purposes.

In my position as a practitioner researcher, parallel to my journey of becoming an antiracist English teacher was my journey as a novice researcher. This required my journal to satisfy multiple purposes. First, I needed to reflect on my own process toward becoming an antiracist English teacher alongside those of other members of the inquiry circle. Next, I used my journal to reflect on my personal and the practical progression of my study through the research process with the understanding that my reflection may lead to changes in the design and implementation of this study. Therefore, I was sensitive to the challenges of looking inward, acknowledging complicity and the discomfort that teachers doing antiracist work will face and I was prepared to adjust my methods accordingly. For example, when the group revealed they did

not like to journal I could not in good conscience require the group to engage in an activity that held no value for them. I also had long debates with myself and revisited topics over and over. For example, I questioned how to organize my findings in Chapter 4. I considered various options, and I am still not sure that I made the best choice but capturing concurrent individual and collective nonlinear journeys proved to be more complex than I had imagined.

Finally, I wanted to reflect on how I, a feminist researcher, facilitated this teacher inquiry circle. The feminist design of this study required a high level of interaction and collaboration between researcher and participants. Leavy and Harris (2019) called reflexivity a “guiding concept” in feminist research and contended constant reflection is necessary to ensure among other things, an awareness of power relations (p. 104). Reflecting on my facilitation in the research journal helped me to make certain that I was mindful of the principles of feminist research and stayed true to living out my feminist life.

Data Analysis

As a feminist qualitative researcher, I used an iterative process to analyze both the meeting transcripts, which consisted of our discussions and our storytelling as well as the personal writing in my researcher journal. In order to have a good understanding of the lived experiences of English teachers journey to becoming antiracist, needed to immerse myself in the data (Leavy & Harris, 2019) which require listening to the audio recordings and reading transcripts many times. In this way I analyzed the data multiple times with an open mind knowing my nor my collaborators “work as a teacher will never be a controlled experiment” (Darling-Hammond & Lytle, 2019, p. 120). The messy nonlinear journey to becoming led to messy nonlinear data. What I mean is that the meetings were in chronological order but the

discussions of race, our histories, and our storytelling seeped out slowly and over time until a more complete picture could be formed of the individual and collective journeys to becoming.

Data analysis began immediately with the process of transcribing the group meetings and attempting to find initial codes. Leavy and Harris (2019) suggested codes “should summarize or capture the essence of that segment of the data” (p. 156). However, the messy work of an inquiry group required being open to possibilities, making open coding an appropriate way to begin. Some initial codes were determined and then revisited throughout the study using a constant comparative method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, I originally started identifying statements for a code about things social justice educators say and I thought I would pursue this code as a theme but in hindsight I found myself searching for statements instead of more inductive ways of letting the codes emerge more organically. As my analysis progressed, the initial open coding was reviewed and grouped (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). From this iterative process, I determined the various themes and meaning making that I present in Chapter 4.

To aid my interpretation, I used analytical memo writing as part of the data analysis process. These analytical memos assisted me in meaning making of the raw data collected (Saldana, 2009). Saldana (2009) suggested, “Think of the code not just as a significant word or phrase you applied to a datum, but as a prompt or trigger for written reflection on the deeper complex meaning it evokes” (p. 32). I wrote dozens of written reflections in different places. Originally in my researcher journal I was writing these long narratives and calling them sidebars. After a while I came to realize that these narratives were a valuable resource for reflection and helped me make decisions as I coded data and identified where I needed to make changes or improvements during the process (Ortlipp, 2008). In addition to my researcher journal, I wrote memos in the note section of my iPhone when I was not at home and on a pad of paper that I

kept at home for such a purpose. Throughout data analysis I kept my research questions in mind. Unlike summary memos, analytical memos forced me to be reflective with the data as I tried to make sense of the lived experiences of English teachers and to disrupt race based inequities.

In addition to analyzing the meeting transcripts, I also analyzed my researcher journal. I used color coded highlighting to identify the different topics or categories found in the journal. For example, I highlighted the ways I approached the research and the decisions I made, I made note of questions for further discussion or that required further reading, and I identified possible findings as I worked my way through the research and the research process. In the journal, I unpacked some of our critical storytelling and decided what stories I should include to support the findings. The researcher journal served a variety of purposes and was invaluable to me as a researcher as I reflected, questioned, and critiqued myself throughout the research process.

Trustworthiness

As a teacher, feminist, and researcher, I recognized how my work was situated within the highly racialized worlds of school and society. Race is socially constructed and I could not escape implicit bias, nor the discomfort of centering race and I did not attempt to remain neutral. Feminist researchers do not strive for objectivity (Jenkins et al., 2019). Instead, I strived to construct meaning from the lived experiences of the participants in lieu of reporting facts (Leavy & Harris, 2018). I saw that the principle of reciprocity was the most important aspect of doing practitioner action research within a teacher inquiry group. Reciprocity is “to make the process of research questioning a two-way one” (Jenkins, 2019, p. 421) where researchers and participants have a mutually beneficial experience (Leavy & Harris, 2019).

Following the lead of Luttrell (2010) who identified as a feminist researcher, “validity in terms of authenticity and reciprocity” was “established through my research relationships” (p.

162). I know I asked a lot from this group of English teachers, and they gave me their precious time and put their lives and work out in the open which was not without risk to them. Adding to their vulnerability was the fact that we were coming out of the two stressful years of teaching and living in a world that was dealing with the lingering effects of the pandemic and the new crisis of an economic downturn and war. During times like these, Oyler (2017) encouraged advocacy and activism by “creating networks for collaborative inquiry and other pathways to nourish and sustain our professional lives” (p. 30). What I offered in return was a place to make sense of their work and the world with like-minded social justice advocates. I offered a safe and brave space outside of the school buildings where my collaborators were teaching, this was particularly important in the current sociopolitical climate where conversations about race may not be welcomed and could result in negative outcomes. I offered the benefits of collaboration to battle the isolation many teachers experience in their classrooms, and I offered the opportunity to share the antiracist actions and other social justice work were attempting to take. Hearing about the work being done can give a sense of hope and possibility that can help us to continue the important work that can only help the vulnerable children who are entrusted to our care.

This is not to say that I did not account for validity at all. Keeping in mind Maxwell (2013) who suggested, “validity is a goal not a product” (p. 179). It was my goal to present the lived experiences of my collaborators in an honest and humanizing way by sharing their stories. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) cited rigor as a means to ensure the trustworthiness of a study. Rigor can be “Methodological, related to the application of methods” (p. 23) such as the careful planning and implementation of the study. There were decisions I could have made that would have ensured more acceptable ways of identifying the trustworthiness of the study. For example, I did not insist my collaborators write in journals and therefore I lost the ability to triangulate the

data by comparing what they said to what they wrote. I stand by that decision, as the feelings of the group were more important than triangulation. The feelings of the group were paramount to my decision making. In a study of antiracism even seemingly insignificant decisions could be fraught with tension. Although Ashni said she did not care what pseudonym I used for her, I absolutely fretted over the decision, I grappled with how I could honor her culture, while I knew nothing about Indian naming customs. I ultimately settled on Ashni because it held the same meaning as her given name, lightning. What I present in this study to the best of my ability are the lived experiences of English teachers and I am open about what in the findings are my interpretation of their words and I use direct quotation extensively to let my collaborators speak for themselves.

I also made my research journal, transcripts, and data analysis and findings available to the group and welcomed their suggestions and contributions throughout the research process. I supplied the group with a Google Form and asked them to reflect on their experiences in the group and of doing antiracist work in their schools. I wanted this transparent and open sharing to ensure the principles of collaboration, community building, and the minimizing of hierarchies that were crucial to the success of circle practices (Winn, 2013). Circles are sacred spaces where “participants are present with themselves and on another in a way that is different from an ordinary meeting” (Pranis, 2005, p. 12). I was rigorous in my desire to honor the sacred space of the circle and the trust that was given to me in my role of practitioner researcher by my collaborators.

Although I made every effort to be transparent and present my collaborators and myself in an authentic way, some might argue that a potential limitation of this study was that the data were self-reported. I can understand the concerns about bias and trustworthiness with my

analysis. I do want to note that we were complete strangers when the study began, and we developed a relationship over the course of our meetings together. Leavy and Harris (2019) cautioned “developing ethically minded and appropriate relationships per your methodology are the cornerstones of good ethical practice during data generation” (p. 113). Due to my feminist practitioner action research methodology and the small sample size, I had to balance the roles of methodologist, facilitator, educator, collaborator, and even activist. I attempted to provide a brave space where the group could discuss the difficult topics of race and racism and that is how I formed reciprocity. Alongside my collaborators I put myself “in the research process in order to build trust, rapport, and mutuality, and to generate meaningful data.” (Leavy & Harris, 2019, p. 118) Our reciprocal relationship encouraged the participants and me to have honest and difficult conversations about our teaching and lived experiences, and in some ways beginning as complete strangers allowed for a brave space. There was nothing to lose in sharing our honest narratives and perspectives.

Forming The Teacher Inquiry Circle

It was mid-August 2022, and the days were getting shorter and the nights chillier and I was trying to fit in the last few lazy beach days before summer was over. Like many educators and students across the country, I started to feel the nervous energy and mixed emotions of a new school year on the horizon. For me this time of year is typically filled with possibilities but in 2022 I felt the optimism keenly. A lot had happened over the summer. I had attended the two-week Institute for Social Justice (ISJ) at a private university in New Jersey where I met like-minded educators who were all journeying along to be agents of change in their schools. During this professional development, I met two English teachers who expressed interest in participating in my study and other members of the ISJ who worked in schools in a variety of other capacities

recommended their English teacher colleagues to me about whom they raved as committed social justice advocates. From this group, I recruited five English teachers to be participants in this dissertation study. The experiences in the ISJ, meeting and learning from the group, and finding potential participants, made me hopeful and eager to be in the classroom again and excited to begin this study.

That August 2022 I set up an initial meeting with my five participants. I also had an English teacher who was a part of my graduate school cohort who agreed to be back up if I needed her. I sent out a Google form to the group to get feedback on the best day and time for all of us to meet. On August 11, 2023, the agreed upon date by consensus came and only two people, Abby and Ashni joined me in the meeting over Zoom and some of my optimism began to wane, but I continued. At this initial meeting I explained the particulars of the study. I described the genesis of my desire to do antiracist work in my English classroom; how I came up with my research questions, the choices I made for the methodology, and what they had signed up for by agreeing to participate. Finally, I explained the roadblocks I had experienced, how I first wanted to do the study in my own school building with my colleagues in the English department, and how I struggled with possibly changing the entire methodology from practitioner action research (PAR) to a different methodology that might be easier or safer, but then ultimately, I decided I had to at least try to conduct a FPAR study. At the time I said to my participants,

This has to be from me and has to be authentic from me. So, I could have gone and said alright I'll send out surveys and I'll collect data that way and then I was like I at least have to try to see if there are other people who want to do this kind of work with me. So hopefully you are these people" (Meeting 8/11/22 initial, p. 6)

It turns out they were the people. In the following chapter I present my findings from the study of the teacher inquiry circle, a small but mighty group of English educators who embarked on an individual and collective journey to becoming antiracist.

Chapter 4: Findings

The summer of 2023 was just beginning, and instead of the latest recommended beach read or a good dose of British Literature, I was attempting to read, *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, well actually I was reading the introduction to “Grapes” as Steinbeck historian Robert DeMott called it, and I was not sure if I was going to make the 455 page commitment. Honestly, I was against reading the novel because I thought it would be boring, which is brave for me to confess because in my experience the perception of an English teacher is that we love and have read every book ever written. To these assumptions I typically respond, we are English teachers, but we are only human. It hurts my heart to admit it but, I rarely have time to read fiction solely for pleasure and I did not want to waste the opportunity to read something soul nourishing or at least enjoyable, to read about an Oklahoma family fleeing the dust bowl.

In the introduction DeMott (2006) wrote of Steinbeck, “His concern was humanitarian: he wanted to be an effective advocate but did not wish to appear presumptuous” (p. xxviii). I too am concerned about writing myself and white teachers as saviors or heroes or writing the teachers of color and students as victims or requiring pity. I worry about presenting my study in a way that does justice to the amazing participants who traveled on the journey with me. A journey that, like the fictional Joad family’s to and around California, was full of hope and promise but a journey that was extremely messy, at times painful, and full of thoughts and emotions that are hard to process and articulate. In writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck worried, “I am writing history while it is happening, and I don’t want to be wrong” (p. xxxi). Although the feminist in me balked at the word “wrong,” I completely understand his sentiment. As a teacher, researcher, and human, I want to write about my journey because besides being important in and of itself, it is also bound in the greater social, institutional, and political context of this country and this time

in history which enhances its findings and implications. Young people's lives are impacted every day by what and how they are taught in US schools in a society where many deny race matters and are working to decenter it, while in actuality race matters in every instance, especially in schools.

When I began writing my proposal in the Spring of 2021, I wrote about pushback, book banning, and legislation that makes becoming antiracist not only more difficult for teachers but could cost them their positions and livelihood. Since that time, when I talked to people about my study of antiracist English teachers, even in academic settings, I have been questioned about Critical Race Theory (CRT) and asked about the indoctrination of children. It seems that all the efforts and activism that were sparked after George Floyd's death and the progress made by schools and society to become more antiracist and inclusive are beginning to fizzle out. In 2021, antiracism was an educational buzzword, now it is at worst taboo at best being replaced by other initiatives in schools. In the fall of 2022, I stumbled across a copy of Jewell and Durand's (2020) *This Book Is Antiracist: 20 Lessons on How to Wake Up, Take Action, and Do the Work*, on the clearance rack for 91 cents. When I shared this with the teacher inquiry group we wondered if it was a sign of the times, and we questioned if the progress gained since 2020 was beginning to move backwards?

Today many states and universities are trying to ban any and all Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Specifically, "there are currently more than 30 bills across the U.S. targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at public colleges" (Bryant & Appleby, 2023, para. 1). What might this mean for teachers who promote diversity and equity in their classroom curriculum? What might it mean for doctoral students writing dissertations that focus on antiracism, DEI, and social justice? While book banning has been at an all-time high already,

now not only are more books banned (Bellamy-Walker, 2022), the intense scrutiny has resulted in more teachers being fired for reading them with students (Sonnenberg, 2023). Seemingly harmless picture books like *My Shadow Is Purple* by bestselling children's author Scott Stuart and songs meant to be inspirational like *Rainbowland* by Dolly Parton and Miley Cyrus have been deemed inappropriate and controversial instead of as tools for promoting LGBTQ+ inclusion and acceptance in classrooms (Paul, 2023). The Supreme Court decided that Affirmative Action policies are unconstitutional (Bomboy, 2023), and race cannot be a consideration when determining college admissions further pushing an agenda of colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) that is the antithesis of antiracist practices and ways of being (Kendi, 2019; Picower, 2021; Wetzel, 2020). Exploring antiracism at the moment has been challenging as our inclination was to let anger derail our journey with finger pointing or negativity. Although anger is a valid emotion that is warranted in these times, I along with my collaborators chose to come from a place of strength and positivity. Anger can be a great motivator, but antiracism requires long term sustained journeying and a whole range of emotions, not just anger. It is within this context and as Steinbeck (1939) called it "writing history while it is happening" (p. xxxi) in which my study was conducted and into which I now attempt to deliver the findings in an honest, accurate, and hopeful way.

In this chapter I present the findings of the seven-month study of social justice oriented English teachers who formed a teacher inquiry circle as a vehicle to progress on their journey of becoming antiracist English teachers. The findings of the study are not a neat or complete package delivered at the end of a journey. There is no end or destination to becoming antiracist. Therefore, what I present here is just a snapshot in time, a look into what attempting to become antiracist might look like and the different ways individuals can be antiracist. I began this study

in the Summer of 2022, with a lot of hope, wondering if I could find some answers to my two research questions:

1. How can a group of English teachers in an inquiry circle actively work to disrupt the structures, policies, institutions, and systems that act as barriers and preserve race-based inequities in their classrooms?
2. What are the lived experiences of English teachers from a variety of contexts as they attempt to become antiracist teachers in the English classrooms where they teach through a teacher inquiry group?

I wanted to read the world of antiracist English teachers and see what that world revealed. In keeping with a feminist practitioner action research (FPAR) methodology and in the traditions of peacemaking circles, the teacher inquiry circle used inquiry and storytelling to move forward on our antiracist journey(s). From the very beginning, I explained to the group that our journey would be both individual and collective.

While our teacher inquiry circle was a collaborative venture in between our meetings, each of us was teaching, learning, and attempting to grow on our own, in our separate school environments. Each of us was working toward becoming and bringing our own identities, histories, and unique ways of being antiracist to the group. Therefore, less as a means to compare one school or teacher to another, an exploration of our individual journeys shows how there are more ways than one to be antiracist and to be a teacher for social justice. In a study of English teachers from a variety of contexts, our individual journeys highlight our individual contexts which is important. Context is a significant force that influences many aspects of a teacher's experience. Where the classroom is located, geographically and within its socio-economic designations, impacts the curriculum, the amount of autonomy a teacher has over the curriculum,

and the decisions the teacher makes in the classroom daily. Therefore, to present my findings, the overall organization of this chapter focuses on and presents these concurrent individual and collective journeys. I have organized the chapter based on these journey(s) and not in a chronological or theme-based manner, because the nonlinearity reflects the interplay of our circle and the lived experiences of the participants.

The organization of the chapter is as follows: I begin with the individual journeys not because the individual journey takes precedence over the coincident collective journey, but as a means to introduce the members of the teacher inquiry circle. For each collaborator, I provide some biographical history including experiences with diversity, their professional experiences, their attempts to take action, and the varied ways in which they were striving to be antiracist and live a social justice life. I then follow with a description of the unique ways the members of the group identified ourselves as antiracist educators. Next, I describe the collective journey of the inquiry circle, specifically how we formed our community and developed our routines and I continue with the intersectional ways in which the teacher inquiry group experienced oppression. I discuss the importance of personal narrative and define critical storytelling which is followed by examples of our critical storytelling and some of the meaning made from that critical storytelling. Insights gained from our critical storytelling ranged from deciding when and how to speak up against racism, microaggressions, and inequity, to the (in)effectiveness of professional development (PD), and motivating others to do the work alongside and with us. I then present our group's shared inquiry as we attempted to learn about and implement restorative justice practices in our classrooms followed by examples of critical storytelling specifically pertaining to discipline and I end with a conclusion to the chapter.

My goal in this chapter is to provide a full, nuanced, and accurate view of the teacher inquiry circle and as I have throughout this dissertation, I take an academic but narrative approach to presenting my research to do so. The concurrent individual and collective journeys are both part of this nonlinear story. This study attempts to present a snapshot in time as four individual teachers of English with different identities and histories attempt to take action in their individual context and when we, four women English teachers, come together to answer the call to action.

Our Individual Journeys to Becoming Antiracist English Teachers

Well before the formation of the teacher inquiry group, my collaborators and I were already concerned with social justice work in schools. When I originally sent out the recruitment flyer, I asked for prospective participants who were interested in teaching for social justice and equity, particularly antiracist teaching practices. Just as “feminist theory is what we do when we live our lives in a feminist way” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 11), advocating for equity in any way we can is what we do to live our lives in a socially just way. I use feminism as an analogy because I know it well and I have been working at living a feminist life, to borrow from Sara Ahmed (2017) and her aptly titled book, *Living a Feminist Life*. Ahmed (2017) said, “To live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable” (p. 2). It was the same with Ashni, Abby, and Alyssa with social justice; they questioned power structures, attempted to take actions, and they held beliefs consistent with those of a social justice advocate not only inside of the classroom but in their lives outside of the classroom as well. The individual journeys of the teacher inquiry circle show there is no one set way of being antiracist or of living a social justice life, a combination of roles and actions are required. The common thread is that these actions are

combined with beliefs, attitudes, and philosophies, a stance that these teachers embody in all aspects of their life (Picower, 2021; Skerrett, 2009, 2011).

What I present here is based on what my collaborators and I shared during our inquiry circle meetings. Through our interactions I attempt to present where each of us was on their antiracist social justice journeys and how we came to the work as our histories informed our beliefs and our teaching (Casey & McManimon, 2021). Although I had originally wanted participants to write their racial autobiographies, each member of the community through discussion and storytelling shared in some way autobiographical accounts of their lives and teaching thus far (Skerrett, 2008, 2009). Instead of all at once, these accounts unfolded over time until a more complete picture of the individual and their journey was formed.

These autobiographical accounts were important for teachers on a journey to becoming, to “examine how their own identities have been shaped and think through the intersection of personal identity and teaching and the ways knowledge of self is essential in teaching for equity” (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019, p. 69). Our histories showed that personal experience with race(ism) and diversity mattered greatly in antiracist work and these experiences begin at a very young age particularly for people of color. When I noted that “Things happen and kids realize earlier than we think how the world is,” Abby replied, “Yeah like right away” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 6) which both Ashni’s and Alyssa’s early experiences corroborate. We also shared where we were currently on our individual journeys, what actions we were taking, and where we might be going.

Each collaborator’s narrative is organized in the following manner. First, I provide some personal background and history; next I present their current teaching assignment and experiences, followed by a description of their attempts to take individual action in their own

contexts. As I relate these experiences, I make every effort to use the exact words of my collaborators, in lieu of presenting some long passages and stories I weave together their stories as I understand them as an active listener with their own words to support the ideas and emotions they were bringing to the circle. In the interest of clarity, I also eliminate some of the ums, likes, and you knows that did not help with the meaning but kept them when I felt they conveyed the speaker searching for words as we discussed topics that were difficult to express. In making these decisions, I considered my goal to provide a full, nuanced, and accurate view of the teacher inquiry circle and its members.

Our individual journeys show how we attempted to make sense of ourselves, the contexts where we teach, and each other in the greater context of racialized schools and society. These individual journeys take on importance as it is through our individual experiences that we were able to come together “so that the lines between researcher and researched are blurred and instead we invite the possibilities to explore the complexities of self and other . . . we are in dialogue with and self-reflecting alongside one another” (Klein & Taylor, 2023, p. 30) and attempted to make meaning of our experiences, understand how to be antiracist, and work toward social action and change. When we met each of us came into the work at a different place of becoming. Therefore, I present our individual journeys in progress.

Abby’s Journey: Becoming a Disruptor

Abby self-identifies as a “white American female” (Meeting 2/27/23, p.-8). She specifically noted that her appearance, in addition to making her identity obvious, surprised people as she did not fit their conception of an antiracist and as a result, they questioned her antiracist actions. She said, “The problem is that I am a very white, blond-haired blue-eyed person” and “equity is my thing” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 19). In her personal life Abby related an

anecdote about a man she was dating who was so shocked by her strong commitment to equity, he made assumptions about her family. She said, “He came to my house, and he saw a picture of my kids on the wall. And he actually said that he believed that my children were not going to be white, because of how passionate I am about being equitable and being inclusive” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 19). I had set out to find social justice oriented educators for this study and in Abby I found a self-proclaimed “disruptor” she acknowledged, “just what I am” (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 6) who was committed to equity in and out of the classroom.

Abby’s journey to becoming a disruptor began at a young age. She was born in Brooklyn, NY but moved to a racially diverse neighborhood in Staten Island, NY in the fifth grade. One of her earliest memories of having a racial identity is from this time. She related, “The people that I became friendly with in that school. We all looked different. We all were different. We all had different backgrounds” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 5). Her mother referred to her friend group as “the United Nations” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 5) and encouraged her friendships with all of the children in the neighborhood. Abby stated, “I think that I am the way I am today because of my mother. Right. Because that’s how she raised me to just kind of be a human” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 5). Abby’s parents praised the diversity of her school and showed that acknowledging race was normal and not a taboo topic as many white people describe the colorblindness of their upbringing (Jupp et al., 2016). Subsequently, Abby saw the diversity in her neighborhood in a very positive light. She recounted, “So that was kind of interesting just to kind of see how other people lived and other like traditions and cultures” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 5). As a mother, Abby said she raised her two children “the same way” and “if you looked at my kids, their friend groups you would see diversity as well. So, like I love that” (Meeting 10/10/23, p. 6). As her

attempts at taking action will show, Abby brought this racial awareness and celebration of diversity into her work as a teacher for social justice.

Abby began the 2022–2023 school year as a 7th grade Language Arts teacher at Adams Middle School where she brought into the classroom with her over 16 years of ELA teaching experience. She began her career in 2001 in Staten Island, NY but took a short hiatus to raise her family. Since then, she has been teaching in the same suburban New Jersey school district for the last several years. At this district she taught 4th grade, 6th grade, and the 7th grade, where she found herself at the beginning of the 2022–2023 school year. Abby recently received her master’s degree in educational leadership and during the school year within the time frame of the study she was promoted to vice principal and transferred to Marshall High School in the same district. Although no longer technically an English teacher we decided that her contributions to the inquiry circle and her 16 years of experience in the English classrooms were too valuable to end her participation in our small established group. This turned out to be an advantageous decision as her perspective from her new position as vice principal proved to be invaluable to our collective inquiry into restorative justice practices in schools which dominated much of the conversation in our last few circle meetings.

From my reflections, it was clear that Abby is passionate about education in general and in equity in particular. In the circle, she displayed a wide range of knowledge about teaching practices, education theory, and discipline. I almost felt like the subject matter of English was secondary to her desire to use texts and the tools of the English classroom, “poetry, prose, memoir, drama, writing for variety of purposes, dialogue, discussion, debate” (Winn, 2018, p. 256) as Winn suggested, to improve her practice and carry out her social justice initiatives. She said, “If you are teaching a book, then you are doing it wrong” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 3). Instead,

Abby used the flexibility in the curriculum granted in her context to create unit plans that promoted discussions about life, race, and social justice and helped the students in her language arts class become critical thinkers who learned “how to read literature, how to analyze.” She suggested that “classroom libraries should be a safe space” and condemned “board approved reading lists,” as “always oppressive” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 2).

At the middle school, Abby shared her passion for equity, she was often asked by the administration to conduct PD with her colleagues on DEI topics and she acted as the advisor to the student equity team. Although she lamented leaving her group when she was promoted, she was able to continue her antiracist social justice work at the high school just in different forms. When I asked her if the administration at the high school knew when they hired her that she was so outspoken and passionate about equity work she replied, “They used the word expected that they expected me to do [equity work] and I think I was hired because of that” (Meeting 1/23/23, p. 19). Therefore, as previously stated she was well known in both schools as the “equity person.” When a fellow teacher told her, “Well equity, that’s your thing” she retorted, “Equity is not my thing it is all of our things” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 19). Her stance was that equity is important for all teachers to work toward not just a few, and she was active in trying to get her colleagues to join her in the work.

As a disruptor, Abby frequently and emphatically spoke up against racism and inequity, but she was also gentle and understanding. She said, “Confronting is a negative word but like I guess willing to just address” (Meeting 1/23/23, p. 5). When she did address issues, she did not expect immediate results. She offered, “I always think that nothing gets settled right that minute but give people something to think about” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 6). She knows it is hard for people to change their thinking and shift their beliefs as she too continued to learn and grow

herself throughout our time together. She said, “you can only get better” (Meeting 1/23/23, p. 5). Abby was undeterred by the pushback she experienced and the scrutiny of her colleagues. She characterized antiracist work as difficult and uncomfortable but necessary. She said, “The whole thing with antiracism work is that you’re going to create waves and that’s it and you have to be okay with that. And if you’re not okay with that, then you’re not gonna make any change at all” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 23). Abby continued to “create waves” and disrupt, Abby shared, “I just believe strongly in it. And . . . I think that anytime that you can talk about ways to make things better for all children, right, all students really and for a society I just feel like it’s important” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 28) She remained hopeful that through her actions, she could bring about some change. She volunteered to deliver PD, acted as the advisor to the student equity team, and attempted to center conversations about race(ism), equity, and social justice.

Attempts at Taking Action: Disrupting the Status Quo. A major way Abby attempted to take action was by not accepting the current state of education as unchangeable. She actively worked to change existing inequities and she wanted students to do the same. To that end she served as the faculty advisor for the middle school’s student equity team. In this role Abby acted as a facilitator and let her students lead the initiatives. She described the group of students from the previous year as “a really, really, really amazing group of children who this is what they wanted to talk about. So, they wanted to make sure that everybody was listening” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 4). She proudly explained, “We were the social justice warriors and last year we won an award for our work” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 5). For some of the work this group accomplished, including hosting three movie nights, not only were the students and staff invited but parents and members of the community were as well. After each movie they conducted open discussions about what they had viewed together. The movies were two documentaries, 13th, Now You See

Me, and one film, *Selma*. At our first meeting (9/26/22), Abby described how the group had dwindled because many of her “amazing group” had moved on to the high school. For the 2022–2023 school year, the remaining students wanted to build on the success of the previous year. The group was involved with the New Jersey Coalition for Equity and Action (NJCEA), (a pseudonym) a program sponsored by a university in New Jersey that partners with schools to lead students in social justice work and will come up with a social justice project that they would conduct at the school and present at a conference at the university at the end of the year.

When Abby accepted her new position as vice principal and moved up to the high school, her work took on a different form. She realized how much context mattered on an antiracist journey (Borsheim-Black, 2015; Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Neville, 2020a; Rolón-Dow et al., 2021; Skerrett, 2011), even within the same district, and how individuals and groups can be at different stages in their work (Skerrett, 2011). While the middle school was well versed in equity work, the high school was just beginning. She explained:

I think that like in my other building, we were at a further point, so we could take bigger steps. But now in this building, we can't take, we have to start at the basics. We have to start with the book club. We have to start with the discussion. So, we have to start with getting the staff and the students having those conversations. Where in the middle school we already did that . . . my kids already spoke to the staff. My staff were well aware of how the kids felt. But here we don't have that. (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 29)

Even her former students felt the shift when they moved up to the high school. She said, “My kids last year who were my superstars, this year they just don't have the same voice that they did at the school” (Meeting 1/23/23, p. 11), highlighting her students' nonlinear process and

that antiracist work is both contextual and continuous (McManimon & Casey, 2018; Neville, 2020; Rolón-Dow, 2021).

In the second part of the school year, Abby was going to be part of the high school and staff equity teams. She would attempt to continue her work as she straddled her roles as a school leader and activist (Lopez et al., 2009). As the year progressed, she also hoped to take “bigger” personal actions in her position as vice principal and she was able to make some progress in all three of these actions. She wanted to give feedback about equity and antiracist practices in her observations of teachers (Lynch, 2018). For example, when a science teacher told students that science is male dominated and there were no women recognized in the lesson about atomic theory, Abby encouraged the teacher to approach the issue from a different angle. She said, “it really struck me that you said that as a female science teacher . . . we all know that men are highlighted in science. That was your opportunity to say even though this is true, here’s some women who contributed to atomic theory” encouraging the teacher to “break that stereotype” (Meeting 1/23/23, p. 18) and challenge that narrative for her students (Navarro, 2020; Neville, 2020).

In addition to training the current staff, Abby wanted to hire teachers who were social justice oriented. At our last meeting she said, “I just hired a science teacher who I’m like, super excited about . . . she did equity work in her school . . . She has all kinds of background info. She’s good at community outreach” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 25). Having other teacher activists on staff would help Abby disrupt the status quo (del los Rios et al., 2019; Oyler, 2017; Picower, 2021). Finally, she wanted to disrupt traditional school discipline by implementing restorative justice practices which I discuss in our shared inquiry section.

Ashni’s Journey: A Personal Pilgrimage to Understanding

Ashni self-identifies as an Indian woman. From the very beginning of our meetings, Ashni made it clear that the antiracist work she hoped to do was very personal. At our first meeting she said, “It’s kind of like a personal thing for me more than just a work like for teaching and stuff” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 5). Her focus on the personal aspects of her life stemmed from her experiences of feeling “different” as a child (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 16), a feeling that has never changed. When Ashni’s parents emigrated to the US they moved around until they settled in a small predominantly white town in Bergen County, New Jersey. She described, “I just grew up in a very like not diverse town” and she called the town, “a super small town. It’s like one square mile and there’s just like not that many people there” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 5). Her antiracist journey began in this small New Jersey town.

Ashni did not have a specific moment or earliest memory of realizing she had a racial identity. She stated, “When I started school in kindergarten yeah like it was pretty evident from the beginning” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 6). In school she remembered just having “a feeling” and this feeling was based on how she was treated. She related, “maybe I didn’t say things perfectly. So, I had to take speech for like half a year. So yeah, it was always kind of something I felt” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 6). As Ashni grew up, she said she learned to assimilate. She explained, “It sounds terrible to say but it’s just like, this is how I know how to live my whole life. So, it’s just the lasting impacts of you know, just being different from day one” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 16). As a result, Ashni does not want her own children or her students to have a similar experience. Ashni is married and has two young children. She described: “My husband is actually white. So, my kids are biracial. They’re going to pass as white because they don’t, are not as tan as me. so, it’s like a, it’s like a daily thought in my head” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 6). Her journey to become antiracist was very personal and very much tied to her own experiences and more than just

concerned with being an antiracist teacher she wanted to protect and educate to provide a better future for her own children and her students as well.

Ashni began the 2022–2023 school year as a high school English teacher teaching AP Literature and Composition at Rollings High School. She has been teaching for a total of nine years, but she moved around a bit. She started at a public high school in North Jersey, moved into a position teaching at a Community College for two years, and then to her current position. She began teaching at Rollings High School in November of the 2021–2022 school year as a replacement for “somebody who left.” (Initial meeting, 8/11/22, p. 3). Therefore, during the time of the study, it was her first full school year in this district and at this high school.

From my reflection, Ashni is a lover of literature. A look at her teacher page on the school website will reveal a Malcolm Gladwell quote: “A book, I was taught long ago in English Class, is a living and breathing document that grows richer with each new reading.” She is an upfront and candid person with strong opinions about the teaching of English. She explained, “this is my problem. It's like old curriculums with all this old stuff that like, students are not interested in . . . I'm not either” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 1). In a discussion about English teachers who insist on teaching a book they love but they know that students do not like, she said, “Yeah, like that's what I like but you're not learning it, like you're not teaching yourself like it's not about you. It's about them . . . But a lot of teachers are like, well, I love *Beowulf*. I love *The Canterbury Tales*. I was like cool that's not for them, though” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 3). Ashni was committed to pushing against the status quo and to improving students' understanding of racism and the lack of representation in the curriculum. She said, “I don't think people understand” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 5) the harm that is inflicted. Building on Ashni's commitment

to using more modern texts that she thought would relate to students' lives, Ashni adapted her instruction in the way she thought was best for the group of students in front of her.

Specifically, Ashni doubled down on using diverse texts when the students in front of her were *not* very racially diverse. She noted the difference in teaching at her previous high school which she described as “very diverse” to Rollings High School which is “not racially diverse” and “a whole different curriculum” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 1) and how she needed to adjust her teaching accordingly. She admitted, “I think that not having diverse classrooms whether racially or like in experience or whatever is challenging for me” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 1). She incorporated different voices through the literature she chose to teach and by having more conversations about race(ism) and diversity. She explained that what makes English classrooms liberating is that “great conversations can happen” from the texts that students read, she stated, “Using the texts . . . give a great opening for conversations that sometimes can be hard or challenging.” Ashni welcomed these conversations and diversity in her classroom. She explained, “I get to also introduce my students to different cultures and backgrounds. Ways of thinking. Different languages” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 1). These are all experiences she exposed her students to that she did not benefit from in her own formative years.

At Rollings it was not that she found the students hesitant to have challenging or difficult conversations or to learn about diversity, instead she believed the problem was, “They’ve not experienced it” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 1). So, she uses literature and her English classroom to help them “get out of the bubble” of their little town. As a teacher who is herself racial literate, she wants to pass these skills on to students by giving them the opportunity to discuss race(ism) in productive ways (Sealy-Ruiz, 2021; Stevenson, 2018). She said, “When it comes to reading and like really thinking and sharing ideas and writing about it. I think that they like that it's not just

black or white” and that they are “rarely ever wrong” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 1). Her openness to multiple ideas helped to open up discussions and provided a safe or brave space for students to express themselves. She also explained that she helps them navigate how to discuss and write in “more tactful” ways “so they are not offending their peers or their teachers.” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 1). Her understanding of this need to be tactful may come from her own experiences with microaggressions at the school.

As one of very few teachers of color in the district, she found that she faced microaggressions from her very first day. She shared, “I mean, the first day I started working at [Rollings] . . . this guy asks me like where I'm from, and it just, that, that just makes me super angry. And I just figured that in my adult life, I shouldn't have to deal, because I dealt with that all along, like for so many years” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 16). When she replied that she was from New Jersey, this man who “has a doctorate in English Education,” she continued, “asked me again, like where are you really from? So yeah, I just got pissed and I'm like, I'm Indian. And then he proceeded to tell me about the specific orders that he puts into his local Indian restaurant. I'm like, I got it. I got it like, I don't know. Where do I belong? Not here” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 16). More than once Ashni described navigating microaggressions such as the one on her first day at Rollings High School. She has had several people explain to her that they love Indian food, and she asked a valid question, “Do I say that to you about your Italian food or Irish food or whatever?” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 16). She described these interactions with adults as “You know, it's like so degrading and demeaning. And just like annoying, I don't want to feel. So, I'm sorry. I know that probably sounds terrible, but like, I'm just kind of over it” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 16). In spite of these experiences at the school or perhaps in defiance of them, Ashni continued

to work toward equity in her classroom and her own personal life. She wanted to prevent these experiences from happening to her students, her own children, or anyone.

Attempts at Taking Action: Making the Personal Political. Although Ashni admitted, “Honestly, I like never heard that word [antiracist] before 2020 and Ibram Kendi’s book that’s literally I heard it for the first which is kind of sad” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 2) she has been on her antiracist journey long before 2020. Based on Ashni’s personal history, it is understandable that she described the antiracist and social justice work she is interested in as more “personal” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 5). She said, “I feel like in my everyday life it’s always kind of been a goal of mine . . . so it’s kind of like a personal thing for me” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 5). The work is motivated by her personal experiences, she said:

I like grew up in a town where I was like literally the only brown person for like ever. So, it’s like just a daily experience. And I experienced it now as an adult all the time too. And I just I don’t, I don’t think people understand.” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 5)

The lack of understanding that Ashni described pertained to the need for representation in literature and other mediums and the need for all people to be seen and accepted for who they are. She gave an example of the lack of understanding that she encounters that she would like to work to change, she shared:

Like now what I hear is like oh, you know, diversity and LGBTQ issues and it’s just everywhere, and it’s so annoying and blah, blah, blah, and that’s like the most infuriating thing to me. Somebody just said to me the other day, you know, Hocus Pocus. It’s like they’re redoing it. . . . And somebody just said to me that oh, now they have, I think there’s like Hispanic and Black girls in it. . . . and they’re like, oh, yeah, you know, now they have to change everything to make it more diverse. like well okay, did you see any

brown person in the original Hocus Pocus? Like that was the problem . . . Am I going to blame you know, the old movie now? Like whatever. But it's just that is the problem that I see is that people are so unaware that it was a problem in the past and It's a problem now it's something that they don't understand. (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 5)

Ashni's action was motivated by seeing issues like the lack of representation in the past as a problem that can be fixed, and she can contribute by helping people to understand why it was and still is a problem today. She has used her understanding to be a part of changing people's attitudes toward diversity. Diversity is not something to complain about, it is something to be respected. Ashni was passionate in her plea, and she shared, "I just want to be a part of that change in any small way that I can possibly be. Whether it's learning for myself and my husband" (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 6) or learning for her children. She said, "I guess for me, it's a little bit different because like my kids . . . they pass as white. So, until somebody sees me, it's like, you know, I don't think that they can kind of really guess like what my kids' ethnicities are" (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 6) having children who are biracial, Ashni has taken action by educating them about her and by extension their culture. She explained:

I mean, it's definitely important for me to incorporate my Indian culture into their life because I feel like all the holidays and stuff it's like, you know, predominantly Catholic . . . it takes work from my end to make sure that they are also aware that their mom is a different culture, comes from a different place. (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 7)

Ashni's antiracist work has been as she said, "a little different." She has been confronted by people's perception of her and although she talked about assimilation when she was growing up, "It wasn't really a choice that I had. It wasn't like, oh, I could sit here and talk about my food or culture or race or religion or whatever, because nobody understood it" (Meeting 10/24/22, p.

13) but, now as an adult and mother of two, she feels she does have control over how she reacts to microaggressions, how she deals with her colleagues, and even her own family. She said, “Now I feel like I have the vocabulary to understand it and teach it to my students and my own children that I didn’t have before” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 7). Ashni’s personal life and experiences clearly informed the personal actions she was taking and wanted to take, which in turn informed her actions in the classroom.

While Ashni articulated that much of her antiracist journey was related to her personal goals regarding becoming antiracist and passing that knowledge on to her children, that is not to say she was not doing any antiracist work in her classroom or at her school. Even though Ashni experienced microaggressions and said, “I’m just kind of over it” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 16) which she said more than once during our time together, her words and actions showed she was clearly not.

Instead of giving up, she chose to focus her energy on the young people in her charge. As she explained, “I’m always trying to incorporate relevant, culturally appropriate, kind of greater bigger world literature” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 9) into her teaching. She recently ordered a book by Tommy Orange, a Native American writer, as she attempts to infuse much needed diversity into the curriculum of her classroom. Along with the culturally relevant literature she has been providing opportunities for her students to discuss race in meaningful and positive ways, teaching the students to “adjust their speech and writing to be like more tactful” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 1) the tact that some of her colleagues do not possess. By sharing her experiences, the experiences of diverse characters in the literature, and exposing her students to seeing diversity as a positive and a lack of diversity as problematic, her students can understand the harm that

microaggressions and racism cause. Ashni helped her students avoid perpetuating that harm which was a huge antiracist action.

Additionally, this year Ashni has taken on the role of faculty advisor to the literary magazine at her school, she stated, "I'm going to try to do stuff that way. But that's like, it's going to take some time" (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 9). She was hoping the magazine could be a place to showcase students' perspectives, but she worried that she might experience some pushback. She said:

You know, I feel like I'm gonna have to get approval for things that might be a little bit uncomfortable for people if my students write something or, you know, there's some sort of artwork so yeah, I don't know. Like, I don't really know how the district is gonna handle this kind of stuff yet. (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 9)

Although Ashni was unsure how the magazine would be received, she was hopeful about the opportunity to try. She described her direct supervisor as "pretty great" and believed she had her supervisor's support so as far as being new to her district and concerns about job safety she said, "that shouldn't be a problem" (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 24). Finally, Ashni joined a group of coworkers who want to learn about implementing restorative justice practices for discipline into their classrooms and the school at large which I discuss in our shared inquiry section.

Alyssa's Journey: A Quest to Find Answers

Alyssa self-identifies as "Jamaican and Polish" (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 15). Although her journey to becoming antiracist began early on like other members of the inquiry circle, the motivation she took from these early experiences manifested in a different way. Alyssa was a questioner. She interrogated situations, policies, and people and persistently looked for acceptable not superficial answers to her questions. When no one would give her an answer she

was undeterred and searched and found the answer herself. In our short time together, she asked the most poignant questions and never took no for an answer. Her primary question was how can schools bridge the gap between the racial makeup of teachers and the students they teach? Alyssa began her journey as an interrogator when she moved from her diverse welcoming neighborhood to a predominately white suburban neighborhood and found herself wondering how she could fit in.

Alyssa was born and was living in an urban neighborhood in Hudson County, New Jersey until the terrorist attack on 9/11 when her parents in response to the terrorism said, “We’re too close to the city, we have to go.” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 11). So, when she was around 13, the family moved from their neighborhood which Alyssa described as “a melting pot. You have people from all over, you know, that kind of come together” to a suburban town in Ocean County, New Jersey. She described this move and starting school in the new town as “my first kind of smack in the face so to speak where race is concerned and that I was different” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 11). Although initially looking around and not seeing anyone who resembled her, “maybe two other minorities in the entire school,” she was not worried that the difference would be a problem because her experience in Hudson County was with “all different kinds of people” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 11). She remembered:

So, I didn’t even register it as being a problem, I think, until I began interacting with the people in the school and felt ostracized by them. You know, like I wasn’t included because I didn’t talk like them. I didn’t, you know, like the things they liked or the music they listened to, or I didn’t have, like shared life experiences from having grown up in that particular town . . . it just kind of made me feel othered in that scenario. (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 11)

This experience of feeling ostracized and when she “looked around and I realized like I don’t look like anybody else” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 11) really impacted her antiracist actions. Now, a mother to four young children, Alyssa lives back in the urban area where she grew up and described her children’s school as “so diverse, it’s like a mix of races and you know, cultural backgrounds and all that kind of stuff.” She gushed, “And it’s reflected in the teaching staff . . . my kids are able to see themselves in the teachers that teach them which is incredibly important” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 14). Alyssa had early positive experiences with diversity followed by negative experiences of feeling like an outsider. She values diversity and this value translates to her commitment to diversity and inclusion into her antiracist work as a teacher for social justice. She wanted her students, like her own children, to see themselves in their schools, in their curriculum, and even in their teachers.

Alyssa began the 2022–2023 school year as a high school English teacher at Hudson High School. She started the school year with ten years of teaching experience. First, she taught for seven years at an urban vocational high school and three years ago switched to her current district and her position at Hudson. Although I did not have as much group time with Alyssa, I interacted with her at New Jersey Coalition for Equity and Action (NJCEA) meetings during the school year, and she struck me as a very open, passionate, and self-confident woman. She was immediately comfortable discussing herself and her experiences, both personal and professional in a group setting.

At Hudson she, like Ashni on the first day of school, experienced microaggressions. On her first day she was told not to bring fish or other foods that had strong smells. She said, “It was a very blanket statement like the first day at this new school” and although she vowed to save money by not purchasing food, when she “started bringing in you know like Jerk chicken or

curry goat and oh, they'll walk in. 'Why does this smell so much in here?' Okay, I'm not gonna bring this anymore. I'm gonna buy food" (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 16). Alyssa described this experience and others as "the lengths we'll go to in order to kind of fit into the majority that surrounds us" (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 13). This is the type of negativity from which she wanted to spare her students, and she knows that some teachers in her building are looking at students through a deficit lens. She described an interaction with "one of the English teachers who is a white male" and he told her she was lucky that she started when she did during the pandemic because she was missing the "Portuguese Flu." Having no idea what he meant by this she asked him what he was talking about, she continued:

And he was like, oh, the kids like you know, and we get such an influx around this time of year and it comes again in December because it's the end of, you know, the Brazilian school year so they all come here to continue going to school because it's their summertime and he was like so now and in December. He's like, you'll see it's the Portuguese thing you're gonna see the flu. (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 19)

Alyssa considered, "to treat a child you know, with that kind of disdain" and she worried that "that mentality is just seeping through the way the teachers react, like, correspond with the students, you know, and it's a shame because they're not culturally responsive, they're not culturally respectful" (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 19). She questioned, "If that is what you think of them, then how are you going to teach them?" (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 19). Her experiences with teachers who showed such a lack of respect and lack of cultural understanding have been what motivated her to protect her students, ask difficult questions, and take action.

Attempts at Taking Action: Asking Tough Questions to Bring about Change. Alyssa has been attempting to take action in several ways: in her own classroom, as the faculty advisor

for the Social Justice club at the school, and by representing her school in their partnership with NJCEA. Although she has experienced a lot of push back, she has pushed back some on her own by interrogating what the district was doing in regard to antiracism and social justice and by not taking no for an answer. She described how at one of the NJCEA meetings, it was stated that every school is “required by law . . . to have an equity officer.” She looked into it in her school and as she reflected, “When I asked, no one could give me any information. And I mean, I’m asking administrators, and no one could tell me anything. So, I looked it up” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 22). Alyssa was persistent and her actions were very concrete as she saw inequity and attempted to create change.

When asked about individual actions, she explained her passion for advocating for her students and helping staff understand their continually changing school environment. Alyssa shared, “My goal is to bridge the gap between race or races that are reflected in the students . . . and bridging that gap with the staff” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 18). As the demographics of her school rapidly shift from predominantly white with “an insane influx of Brazilian students” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 18), there are now three predominant groups of students: Brazilian, other Hispanics, and white students. Alyssa’s district is not alone, being unprepared for the rapidly changing demographics are an issue in districts all around the country (Dumas, 2016; Holme et al., 2013). As a classroom teacher she understood that it would be extremely difficult to bridge the racial gap between staff and students (Villegas et al., 2012) and particularly improbable in her position as a teacher to have a role in hiring teachers that reflect the cultural makeup of the school. Still, she advocated for change. She said, “It’s a tall order and I know that, but I am at the very least if I can’t find a way to bridge the gap with having teachers that are culturally reflected, that are hired at the school, at the very least, I want the staff that is there to be culturally

responsive” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 18). When Alyssa asked students in her social justice group about the racial makeup of students and teachers in school she said,

And they feel that the predominant race in the teachers is white male, which is true, it’s very accurate. And I just asked them, like, how does that affect their experience at the school? And they said that you know, it kind of, it doesn’t allow them to express the way they would like to have as students. (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 19)

Her students were asked about the impact of race, and they equated the gender of teachers as well as race of white male teachers in preventing them from fully expressing themselves. Alyssa wanted to change the deficit mindsets that were inflicting harm on students at her school (de los Rios et al., 2019; Love, 2019; Sinclair, 2018). She wanted the staff to change their perceptions so they could see all students “as human beings” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 17) and not as a problem plaguing the school.

In her work toward a more culturally responsive staff (Ohito, 2016; Thomas, 2015) and in her work to amplify students’ voices (McCusker, 2017), she posed a question in the teacher inquiry circle, “where I need the most help is like figuring out how I can work things to not get shut down by my principal” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 19). With a group of students Alyssa proposed beginning a social justice club and offered to be the advisor. When she first proposed the club to the superintendent he told her, “We already have a diversity program . . . so I don’t want your projects to conflict. Is there a different club you’d like to propose?” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 21). Determined to advocate for her students she continued to inquire about the club. When she asked around about the diversity program the superintendent mentioned, one of its members described, “there are five meetings a year. And honestly, we meet for like three hours at a time, but we don’t do anything” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 23). She also found out the members of this all-staff

diversity group are all white. Still there was some worry from the superintendent and some staff members about Alyssa's diverse student group and the staff group "conflicting" and the member of the staff group she spoke with suggested to Alyssa, "ask if you can take my place" to avoid any conflict (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 23). More determined than ever Alyssa was finally able to get the student social justice group started but it was not easy for them to accomplish their mission. She said, "my goal is to break down those barriers and bridge those gaps. And I'm hitting a lot of roadblocks" (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 19).

My Journey: An Exploration of How to Be a Coconspirator

I self-identify as a white woman. In order to take antiracist social justice actions, I need to examine my history and identity closely (Casey & McManimon, 2021; Falter et al., 2020; Singh, 2019). From my positionality I can leverage my privilege (Ebarvia, 2021; Love, 2019) to work toward dismantling structural racism and white supremacy "as it allows [me] to take risks that dark people cannot take" (Love, 2019, p. 159). On my journey I attempted to do this antiracist work as a coconspirator, someone who does not just offer sympathy and stand by or engage in antiracism to be "performative or self-glorifying" but one who takes action (Love, 2019, p. 117).. In my effort to be a coconspirator I started with "the internal work that needs to happen before the outside work can start" (Love, 2019, p. 118). I needed to understand my history and my privilege to prepare for the difficult work of becoming. I also needed to examine why a person with my positionality wanted to do this work. Second wave white identity studies encouraged teachers to move beyond just acknowledging their whiteness and privilege to taking action (Jupp et al., 2016; Jupp & Lensmire, 2016) and I need to continually reflect on my motivations so my actions can be authentic and not performative. As I began my antiracist journey, I examined and

continued to examine my history and how my history from the very beginning impacted the decision I initially made to become a teacher and later to become an antiracist teacher.

My journey began when I was born, raised, and lived in an urban neighborhood in Hudson County, New Jersey for the first 27 years of my life, until after my marriage when my husband and I agreed that after my experiences in public and private schools in Jersey City, we did not want to raise our children in the city. Today I am aware that it was due to privilege that I was able to make this decision. When I thought about my earliest recollection of my racial identity, it went back to growing up in my neighborhood that was predominately white and although I was young, I remember seeing it change. As I reflected in one of our first inquiry group meetings, “then like in the early 70s is when white flight started to happen and you know, it's like well documented. And all the white residents moved to the suburbs, and you know, we stayed.” I continued, “My parents didn't move out of that apartment that we lived in . . . until probably like 15 years ago. So, at one point, we were like one of three white families on the street” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 6). My neighborhood became predominantly Hispanic with groups of Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Cuban residents who continually fought amongst themselves, mostly in a good-natured way, about which group was the best at whatever the competition was and why. I told the group, “That’s a whole other story” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 6). At a young age I understood that different cultures were important and that even if people looked the same their customs, beliefs, and even their Spanish language could be quite different. My early experiences put me in a position to see and celebrate diversity and to observe injustices.

The neighborhood was a huge contrast to the private Catholic school I attended. My best friend/next door neighbor was Puerto Rican, “she was always like in, in the neighborhood, because it did wind up being a predominantly Spanish speaking neighborhood” but in school

“she was one of like three Hispanic students” in the predominately white school. I explained, “And of course we had one other Hispanic student in our grade who was a boy and then it was everybody’s mission that they had to date. Like even from the fourth or fifth grade, it was like, well, that’s your boyfriend, because you’re both Hispanic” and I remember thinking “that is so wrong” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 6). In addition to what my friend had to deal with racially, there was “some classism going on there. Because we were from that particular street. And really, most of the people that went to our school lived on, like, the opposite side of the park. So, it was almost like that railroad track thing. We were from the wrong side, you know, of town to be at that school” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 6). These experiences really underscored for me that not everyone’s experiences are valued and being in diverse places like the neighborhood expanded my thinking and understanding of life in all its beauty: language, food, music and knowing that regardless of differences, a community can be formed. After my student teaching experience in a school with a 98% white enrollment, when I was applying for my first teaching job, I knew I preferred a diverse community. I did not realize at the time how unique a diverse school was in the state of New Jersey.

At the beginning of the 2022–2023 school year, I was teaching English at McKinley High School. This was the beginning of my 22nd year of teaching and I have taught all 22 years at the same high school which I said, “makes me happy” (Initial meeting 8/11/22, p. 2) but I also acknowledged that never changing schools “we really are in our own bubble . . . I’ve been in the same building for 21 years so sometimes you know I want to you know think these things [inequity and racism] are an exaggeration” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 7) but obviously living in a racialized society, studying antiracism, and conducting this study, I know they are not. Although McKinley High School has always been diverse as time progressed, it became more and more

diverse in different ways. We have had an increase in English Language Learners and students coming from other parts of the state to settle in the town (Holme et al., 2013). It has also grown exponentially from a small high school with less than seven hundred students when I started to the over thirteen hundred students who attend today.

My schedule for this year was similar to what it has been for the past five or six years, teaching AP Literature and Composition and teaching Freshman English. In these classes I highly value student voice and student choice as I adhere to principles of feminist pedagogy. I explained, “We have to have choice. Whenever we can. I mean that's the way I run my classroom all the time. Even my freshmen sometimes are like, can't you just pick for me? Like, you have to have some choice. And then some of them say nobody ever asked us what we wanted to do before” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 4). I, like my collaborators, also endeavored to create a classroom environment where students felt comfortable discussing race(ism) and other uncomfortable topics, topics that were familiar to my diverse students. I found when students are allowed to be uncomfortable and discuss uncomfortable things in a brave environment, learning happened, students had more empathy for others, and community can be built. I shared an anecdote from my freshman class in the teacher inquiry circle, I said, “My freshmen were writing problem solution essays and one student asked if she could write about the pink tax and nobody in class knew what it was because first of all we don't talk about menstruation” (Meeting 1/9/23, p. 17). When a student came up with an inequity to solve, the other students listened instead of me the teacher telling them. I explained, “I feel like the freshmen are a little less set in their ways and they're a little more open” (Meeting 1/9/23, p. 17) to discussing and listening. These were examples of how the English classroom can be liberating but the teacher inquiry group also discussed what is oppressive about English classrooms.

When we discussed what was oppressive about English classrooms, my classroom, included, I responded, “Academic writing, being the only valued way to express yourself” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 2) and I admitted, “I struggle with that so much because I teach the AP class and they’re going to take the AP test” (Meeting 9/6/22, p. 2). I struggled because I remember my own experience of being ill prepared for college. So, as Baker-Bell (2020) challenged literacy teachers to “confront white linguistic and cultural hegemony” and “contest anti-Blackness” (p. 8) I found myself telling students that College Board is the root of all evil but still perpetuated their agenda in my writing instruction. I wondered if it is possible to be a coconspirator under these circumstances.

Like many English teachers I have a love and passion for literature and use literature in my classroom to broaden students' understanding of the world. Although I do not have much say in creating the curriculum, I know representation is crucial, I choose literature from a variety of sources and give students options whenever possible. The district gives students some diverse choices in the English curriculum and has added new titles over the years. For example, the graphic novel, *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang (2006). But just adding diverse books or switching a Eurocentric classic with a book by a person of color are not enough to be antiracist (Ebarvia, 2019; Sinclair, 2018). With a very diverse school, choosing representative literature takes on a different challenge. We have a large Asian population so, I explained:

I'll say oh, we're gonna read like an Asian artist, you know, authors but there are so many different communities under that umbrella of Asian and that, you know, like reading something from China is not necessarily going to appeal to the, you know, the greater population that we have in our school. (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 2)

In fact, my students have at times expressed "they feel like a lot of times there's a hierarchy within these [Asian] sub I guess categories for lack of better words you know, these demographic designations. Like there are books by or about one group but none about another group" (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 2).

My philosophy of valuing student voice and choice spilled over to my other work outside of the classroom. I am a member of my School Equity Team (SET). We met monthly to discuss ways to celebrate diversity and to educate our students and staff about issues of equity and inclusion. There too I worked on being a coconspirator I said, "with the kids too, because we do, we have kids on our team as well. You know, just trying to take the back seat and let the kids talk" (Meeting 9/27/22, p. 7). In this way I supported my students and showed solidarity (Love, 2019) without speaking for them.

I was attempting to practice being a good coconspirator and collaborator, but it was not easy. The role of a coconspirator requires more than to just "loudly identify as an ally" (Tanner, 2019, p. 194). It requires a person to confront power imbalances and to unlearn practices that protect "systems of privilege and oppression" (Love, 2019, p. 118). Not all of these attempts were successful, nor were they always welcomed. Ahmed (2017) wrote, "When you expose a problem you pose a problem" (p. 37). As I became more involved with the SET my colleagues began to notice. I said, "I've been feeling like I'm becoming that person that everybody, like doesn't want to say things in front of anymore" (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 11). In one particularly strange encounter, a white woman colleague of mine made an inappropriate comment about black women who were heads of households then laughed and told me she just wanted to see how long it would take for my reaction. I pondered, "Was she testing me? Even if she did not believe that black women should pull themselves up from their bootstraps, you think like it's

funny to joke about, to tease me about my commitment for things to be more equitable?” (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 13). To respond with anger or frustration would have proven this woman right, that I was the problem, too serious, or could not take a joke (Ahmed, 2017). Some colleagues referred to the SET work as “my DEI stuff” (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 11), consciously or unconsciously trying to diminish the importance of the work we were trying to accomplish. I invited these people to join me on the SET, but none took me up on my offer.

Attempts at Taking Action: Resisting Performative Allyship. At the beginning of this journey, I told my collaborators, “I just want to do something. I feel compelled to do something” (Initial meeting 8/11/22, p. 7) which was true. I wanted to take some kind of antiracist action but as I have progressed along, I realized it was important to be particular about the actions I take. Love (2019) said, “A coconspirator functions as a verb, not a noun” (p. 117) and warned against performative allyship. I wanted to lean into my roles as a doctoral candidate, a feminist pedagogue, and a social justice educator and contribute in positive ways to my school community. These aspects of who I am sounded good but, “merely saying the words does not make you a freedom fighter—your actions do” (Love, 2019, p. 36). The ways I attempted to take action were in my work as a member of the SET, by continually educating myself about antiracism, DEI, and social justice issues, and working on and practicing being a good coconspirator and collaborator.

The most obvious way that I attempted to take action was as a member of the SET. The SET at the high school where I teach met once per month during the school year except in May when we met twice to prepare for the end of the year showcase. SET meetings are attended by faculty, a vice principal, students, and occasionally the school principal and some parents. Therefore, the number fluctuates, there could be eight people at the meeting or eighteen. In these

meetings our main focus is to plan for our monthly celebrations of diversity. Our district has an approved list of monthly observances we are required to celebrate (e.g.: Hispanic Heritage Month, Indic Heritage Month, and Black History Month) and specific holidays to acknowledge like Diwali and Juneteenth. We also worked closely with our student ally groups, two of which were newly formed this year, the Muslim Student Association (MSA), the Black Student Union (BSU), and Showing Tolerance and Respect (STARS), our LGBTQ+ organization which has been active for the last couple of years, to add additional events and celebrations. For example, the MSU hosted an Iftar dinner during Ramadan. All of our ally groups and their events are open to everyone in the community regardless of how they identify.

Through these various events and celebrations, we have attempted to educate and build our community by respecting and celebrating differences and the diversity of the larger school community. In many ways these events can be considered a huge success if they are judged by the participation and feedback from the students. Typically, these events are fun and include food, music, and dancing, but I worried sometimes that the education part was lacking. On the other hand, I acknowledged that “we’re trying to educate them about the different holidays and traditions and then we make them read stuff” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 3) and that just reading something was not going to get the community more invested in diversity nor improve the lives of our students.

A coconspirator acts to decenter whiteness and reduce its power (Love, 2019). In our school equity team meetings, I am passionate about the work, and I feel like I have a lot to contribute but I feel like I need to let others lead. I asked, “How can I be a voice but not overstep or not, you know, be the lead voice or try to like, jump in there too much” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 7). For example, I explained, “it was just like Hispanic Heritage Month. And, you know, two

team members are Hispanic, so it was like . . . let them take the lead and they were like, why are you letting us take the lead? Like, what do you think?” Although, other members of the group, myself included were willing to say what we thought, “we were trying to say like you should be telling us, not representing all Hispanic people, but like, in this case, you’re on the school equity team and Hispanic and it’s Heritage Month and like what do you think? What do you want to do?” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 7). We found letting the students take the lead gave the SET the best results. For example, members of the BSU attended the meeting and gave us wonderful ideas about how they would like to celebrate Black History Month. Figuring out the best way to share power and be a good coconspirator is a work in progress.

One activity that I did feel had a positive impact on the students was a project I started called “Building Empathy: Telling Stories.” As a requirement of attending the Institute for Social Justice during the summer of 2022, I was tasked with conducting a social justice project in my school, with grant money from the University who ran the institute. I suggested we partner with an organization that uses storytelling to build community and teach empathy. I described the project to the inquiry group as, “a big like, undertaking, A lot going on . . . we have like almost 50 kids involved” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 3). Although it was my idea my colleagues “were all on board” but I was in charge of all the decision making, my colleagues thought, “well, you know all about it like this was your idea. And I’m like, but I thought we were doing it together” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 3). Taking the lead in this way made me very uncomfortable and lacked the collaboration that activism warrants (Davis et al., 2022; Love, 2019). The hope is that the students who participated this year can take the lead next year and I can take a more supportive role. The other hope is that the group will take the next step and use what is learned from the storytelling to participate in some civic engagement. The nonprofit with whom we partnered

explained how students would come up with the idea, conduct research, and complete a civic engagement project. When I initially proposed the project, I was really excited about the prospect. This year we ran out of time and instead of a student-centered project it turned into an idea to paint rocks for a rock garden in the courtyard, which was lovely but much less radical than I had hoped.

Another area of focus for me this year was to continually educate myself about antiracism, DEI, and social justice issues. Of course, I was conducting this study and acquiring first-hand knowledge of how these issues were playing out in a variety of contexts with and from my collaborators, I was also attending PD outside of school with the NJCEA. Finally, I signed up to be a part of a group that wanted to educate ourselves about restorative justice and explore how we could implement restorative justice practices in our school for both discipline and community building. I discuss this further when I discuss our shared inquiry.

All the members of the teacher inquiry group, myself included, came to the group at different places on our journeys. Each of us was attempting actions in our individual contexts and doing the work in our own unique ways. As our journeys show there is no one correct way to be antiracist and being antiracist defies simple labels. In the next section I examine these labels and our unique antiracist teaching selves.

Naming Our Unique Antiracist Teaching Selves

At a New Jersey Coalition for Equity and Action (NJCEA) meeting, attendees were presented with possible personas people doing social justice work take on. We were asked for example, are you a social justice professor? One who could explain theory but did not take action or are you a social justice dictator? One who was inflexible in their demand for zero tolerance in the name of DEI and made people feel uncomfortable. Each of the personas held a slightly

negative view so instead, we were encouraged to be like farmers who planted seeds of change and nurtured our communities into understanding. While these metaphors were interesting, they implied that social justice work was taking on a persona instead of being a way of life, that there was a better way or the best way to be antiracist. An examination of the individual journeys of English educators who were on a journey to becoming more antiracist showed that there was not one specific or correct way to be an antiracist educator. These journeys showed that we defied simple labels or personas that could be put on or taken off. Each member of the teacher inquiry group, in their individual context, had to do the work in a way that made sense for them personally and professionally.

Love (2019) critiqued, “Too often we think the work of fighting oppression is intellectual. The real work is personal, emotional, spiritual, and communal” (p. 51). In the teacher inquiry circle, as we all worked to find our voices as antiracist English teachers all of us brought our own unique identities, our personalities, and our strengths and weaknesses to the work. Abby, our disruptor, brought her bravery and unwavering passion, she said, “I’m a disruptor, just what I am” (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 6). Ashni brought her candid take on life; she was not afraid to admit, “I’m just over it” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 7), but she was still willing to continue her personal goal to educate herself and others, she said, “I have the vocabulary to understand it and teach it” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 7). Alyssa, a consummate questioner, brought her openness to be vulnerable and her fierce protectiveness to the work. She stated, “It’s that kind of just ignorance, that I would love to just completely obliterate” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 17). I brought my desire to be a coconspirator and my feminist world view as “it is not something we can put down” or perform (Ahmed, 2017, p. 15).

Being antiracist is much more than a single label, it is fluid and requires multiple shifting roles (Skerrett, 2011). Antiracist educators who are working to provide equitable education to all students need to be organizers, helpers, advocates, and rebels (Singh, 2019), just to name a few. At one meeting I asked: What is an antiracist teacher? What qualities do they possess? and what actions do they take? Abby responded rather quickly, but slowly and thoughtfully chose her words. She offered:

So, an antiracist teacher has to actively work to dismantle things, an antiracist teacher is going to point out injustices and make an effort to bring in articles slash literature that might be considered controversial to some degree. What attributes or qualities does an antiracist teacher possess? I think that they have, um realized they are never going to make everybody happy. They embrace conflict and hold steadfast to their beliefs. I think the person has to be a little bit willing to be outspoken and doesn't quietly sit and observe. What actions do they take? I think they start conversations, maybe interrupt conversations, support students and then finally maybe give students a place to speak up freely but safely. (Meeting 1/23/23, p. 4)

And when I said, "from what I know about you I think you are describing yourself here," (Meeting 1/23/22, p. 4) Abby paused before she replied, "I mean, I hope so, I hope I have all of that, I think so" (Meeting 1/23/23, p. 4). I prompted her with "This idea of the journey and that you just never get to the place, you like never arrive" (Meeting 1/23/23, p. 4) and she acknowledged that it is a journey, she said, "that is what it is, you can always get better" (Meeting 1/23/23, p. 4), Even if the members of the inquiry circle did not always get it right, getting better was what we were striving to do.

Each of us in our own way was committed to the work, as we began an antiracist journey, and attempted to take antiracist actions. As committed as we were and as much action as we attempted to take, we were not done. There was still more work to do. Our journey was a dual one; a personal journey and a collective journey while we did our individual work, not alone but alongside one another. What follows is not what happened next, I present our collective journey which was happening concurrently to our individual journeys.

Our Collective Journey to Becoming Antiracist English Teachers

Our collective journey began at the initial meeting of the teacher inquiry circle in August of 2022. The teacher inquiry circle was comprised of a group of racially literate, social justice oriented English teachers who were committed to doing the difficult work of becoming antiracist. My recruitment flyer appealed to teachers who self-identified as teachers for social justice and who wanted to form a community of support during these difficult times. Although we were complete strangers, consenting to join the group signaled to me that we held some common interests including antiracism and equity work. As a group we explored our identities and understood that becoming antiracist was ongoing and not a place of arrival. While our individual journey showed the unique, nuanced, and myriad of ways an English teacher can work toward becoming antiracist, our collective journey shows that the work can be done collaboratively if not with colleagues in an individual context, across contexts as with this group.

Grossman et al. (2001) warned that building teacher communities can result in pseudocommunities where everyone is in agreement, “An interactional congeniality is maintained by a surface friendliness, hyper-vigilant never to intrude on issues of personal space” (p. 20). I do not believe this was the case with the teacher inquiry circle. First, we did not work together and came into the group as strangers. In the circle, members of the group shared their

personal stories and lives with each other. The group showed that through the strong commitment of collaborators to social justice work, as their individual journeys show, it was possible for a group of individuals to come together with a shared purpose. Although we were strangers, our circle was a type of affinity group bonded through the sharing of stories and our desire to make a difference, however small, in our classrooms, schools, and the world.

In this section, our collective journey is organized as follows: First, I tell the story of our group and how we built community, followed by an examination of the intersectional ways we experience oppression. Next, I define critical storytelling and weave in examples of our critical storytelling with the meaning we made from the stories we shared. Then I describe how we conducted our shared inquiry including how we came to our topic, restorative justice in education, where we stepped into the restorative justice work, our attempts to take action, and finally critical storytelling specific to discipline that reveal the need to change deficit views of students to improve discipline. On our collective journey as we traveled alongside one another, shared stories and as we questioned together in our shared inquiry, we came to understand school discipline in new ways, we searched for solutions, and we posed more questions. Here is the beginning of our collective story.

Building Routines and Community

In August of 2022, I opened a zoom meeting and anxiously waited. It was the initial meeting of the teacher inquiry group and as the email I sent to my five prospective participants read, the purpose of the meeting was “so we can begin to form a community and make plans for the coming school year” (Email 8/2/22, para. 2). Looking back, I realized I wrote “fingers crossed” in my researcher journal before that first meeting (Journal 8/10/22, p. 2) but I knew I needed more than just wishing for good luck to conduct this study. I also knew that forming a

community was essential. We could not do the difficult work ahead of us on our journey(s) to becoming antiracist or create the sacred, interconnected space of an inquiry circle unless we came together (Pranis, 2005; Winn, 2013). So, I sat in front of my computer screen reminding myself of my commitment to “authenticity, honesty, and transparency” (Journal 8/11/22, p. 3) and repeating the mantra “just be yourself” over and over (Journal 8/11/22, p. 3) until I heard the chime indicating someone was ready to join me. I took a deep breath and literally and metaphorically let them in.

Understanding the importance of community building, I did prepare for and attempt to ensure that the teacher inquiry circle formed a community. At our initial meeting I suggested we introduce ourselves: Name, preferred pronouns, teaching experience, and I asked them to answer an informal question, what show, or series are you binge watching right now? I presented a short Google slide presentation that described the genesis of the study, I was open about my own personal questioning and my hopes and fears about conducting this research. In this way, I modeled my own vulnerability and commitment to the process before delving into the difficult topics of race(ism), inequity, and antiracism.

As I would do in any classroom situation, I attempted to set up community norms with the group. I was initially surprised that neither of my collaborators seemed worried that there would be any discomfort or disagreements. I opened a Google doc for us and suggested we type our ideas. The norms they suggested were simple and positive. Abby suggested we be “Open and honest and speak from the heart” she added we should “Be courageous” (Meeting 9/26/23, p. 1). Ashni typed on the document, “Listen with an open mind” (Meeting 9/26/23, p. 1) and I typed, “What is shared here is not shared with others outside of the group” to reiterate the necessity of confidentiality, and that we should “Create a space that is as safe as possible”

acknowledging that complete safety cannot be guaranteed but it was the goal (Arao & Clemmens, 2013; Winn, 2013). It occurred to me that throughout our time together even though we discussed difficult topics such as: race, racism, microaggressions, colorism, and deficit views of students, particularly students of color, we never revisited these four norms the way I might when I have reviewed community norms in the past. I found through our conversations and storytelling that we all came to the meetings willing and prepared to discuss whatever topic came up. I often thanked the group for being so candid and willing to share their personal stories and perspectives because I appreciated how their openness and comfort with being uncomfortable was not the norm in discussions about race(ism) and antiracism (Casey & McManimon, 2021; Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Therefore, our group became a brave space where the members became risk takers who were willing to feel discomfort to learn and grow (Arao & Clemmens, 2013)

Outside of the discussion of difficult topics, one way we did create community was by always checking in at the beginning of the meeting. In tune with the post pandemic focus on mental health, check ins have become a staple of my classroom interactions with my students and they certainly applied to the teacher inquiry circle. Even before we “journalled” or discussed our question, instead of jumping directly to topics that are uncomfortable and difficult to talk about, we talked for a few minutes about our day. A popular topic for us was what we were doing to relieve stress. Through these informal check ins, we found out Abby recently adopted a puppy and taking care of her puppy relaxed her. I talked about baking and going to the gym to release positive endorphins. Through these even more informal interactions, and by informal I just mean outside of the meeting agenda, because all of our meetings were very informal, we began to know one another as people. When Alyssa first joined us, she worried her children

would be a distraction. I described our group as “very laid back” and what we were doing as “This is all about care and taking care of each other and having community and just talking about issues and we’re just trying to, like, inquire more about how we can be antiracist English teachers.” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 8). I think motherhood was an important bond for us as we all in some way acknowledged that the work was important for ourselves, our students, and our own children growing up in a racialized and inequitable society. Ashni’s children ages five and two would sometimes join in with questions like “who is that?” or to share some tidbit of information like one of them getting a haircut or what they were going to be for Halloween. These were not seen as interruptions but as part of juggling being a mother, teacher, and doing social justice work. And they provided bright spots amidst the intense topics and critical thinking done at 7PM at night sometime between dinner and bedtime. All of us were trying to find a way to fit it all in after a day of teaching. We supported each other by acknowledging how tired we were, we empathized with each other about kids, grading, deadlines, the things we all had in common and other circumstances we did not like when Abby injured herself and needed crutches, we offered encouragement and well wishes.

Although I would like to take credit for creating an open and honest space for our community, I have to give credit to my collaborators who agreed to journey along with me and in doing so were fully committed to being open and honest. It is amazing to think that we started off as complete strangers and there was a certain risk in how this community was going to bond and how this study was going to happen. We did not know each other at all, they knew I was a doctoral candidate, and I knew they were English teachers. I had to put my trust in them and they in me and each other before any of us really knew anything about one another. I believe their trust stemmed from their commitment to antiracist and social justice work, which was apparent

from their individual journeys. Both Abby and Ashni, and later Alyssa, were willing to give their time and reveal themselves, their history, and beliefs with strangers if it meant taking some antiracist action. After the initial meeting, the teacher inquiry circle we formed met once or twice per month from September 2022 until February 2023. For most meetings it was Abby, Ashni, and me but in October I spoke to Alyssa at a New Jersey Coalition for Equity and Action (NJCEA) event about joining us and she did come to the meeting. Although she did not meet with us regularly her input to the group and her dedication to the work was significant and needed to be included.

In our meetings, being a group of English teachers specifically made it easier for us to communicate and have rich conversations. Skerrett (2009) said of English teachers, “We value reading, we value writing, we value literature . . . we can learn a lot from the stories of others” (p. 281). Throughout that time together we leaned into dialogic practices from our own English classrooms. We all used our years of experience conducting book talks, discussions, collaborative learning, and even Socratic seminars, a type of shared inquiry in our own classrooms, which made it natural for us to use these familiar strategies. Just as, “a Socratic discussion with students holds as the aim a mutual search for a deeper and wider understanding . . . not a battle or a debate and there are no opponents” (Parker & Hess, 2001, p. 279) our inquiry circle worked together to struggle with being antiracist on an arduous but important journey to becoming. We used our English skills, anecdotes, storytelling, and critical storytelling to investigate ways in which we were or could disrupt the structures, policies, institutions, and systems that act as barriers and preserve race-based inequities in our classrooms and to explore our lived experiences as English teachers who were on a journey to becoming antiracist. We engaged in both collective and individual inquiry, we shared our experiences both personal and

professional, and we built up a small community. In this community we quickly and organically fell into a routine that I had not initially planned.

Our group always met on Monday evenings, so on the Sunday before a meeting I would send a reminder text message and on Monday morning I would send out an email with the recurring Zoom link and an agenda. The agenda was as repetitive as our routine, basically the agenda for each meeting would be: Check in, Journaling/Discussion of a prompt, choosing an inquiry protocol, beginning the inquiry process, and planning the future meeting(s) (date & time). These agendas were broad, flexible, and just a means to provide some structure and they were created based on our routines. Even though I asked at the end of each meeting when do you want to meet next, we always stuck with a Monday at 7 pm. These routines were based on the group's needs and their comfort level. Originally, I had planned for participants to write in a journal at each meeting. Although the group was willing to write in a journal, this goal shifted as Ashni admitted, "I'm not a journaler but I'll do it for you" (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 11). I appreciated the offer, but I also understood the group's willingness to participate even without journaling, they just needed a topic to get started. In subsequent meetings I dropped the journaling and I decided to use prompts to promote discussion. The prompts came from *The Racial Healing Handbook: Practical Activities to Help You Challenge Privilege, Confront Systemic Racism, and Engage in Collective Healing* by Anneliese A. Singh (2019).

I decided to use this book as a basis for connecting at the beginning of our meetings. After checking in, each meeting would open with a prompt from Singh (2019) in the form of a question to answer. This was an inquiry circle so tackling questions was part of the fiber of the group. Typically, we would go around and each of us would share in no particular order, which is a principle of circle processes, each person has an equal turn but can pass if they do not want

to speak (Pranis, 2005). All three of us responded to each question every time and much was discovered from answering these questions. The purpose of these questions was not to interview members of the group, instead, this answering of questions served two other purposes. First, it warmed us up and helped us reconnect as scholars and learners as we came back together after two weeks, three weeks, or sometimes longer without speaking together. Second, it provided a structure to our journeying as the questions move forward from childhood to adulthood and current interactions with (anti)racism in our school settings and in our lives.

One of the things I found valuable about the book is that it adopted a healing mindset (Singh, 2019, p. 5) which argued that all people regardless of how they identify are harmed by racism and that working to dismantle structural racism begins with individuals understanding how racism impacts them. Singh (2019) said of herself, “identifying ways I could act differently when I encountered racism in day-to-day life, so as to be genuinely antiracist and perhaps inspire others to do the same” (p. 5). I also like the framing of the healing action as a journey and the acknowledgement that people were at different points and that it is okay. Singh (2019) offered her readers encouragement to “be gentle with yourself” to “read alone or gather with fellow comrades” and to “take time to breathe and feel” (p. 9) as we do antiracist social justice work together and this is what our teacher inquiry circle attempted to do every time we met.

I had initially worried I would not be able to find anyone to participate in this study, which required time and effort from its participants, I also worried that the other practitioners in the group were getting something out of being a part of the FPAR, I said, “I want it to be meaningful for you, for you to get something out of it” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 7). Both Ashni and Abby reassured me and Ashni said, “I don’t think you have to worry about what we’re getting out of it. It’s always good to talk to people who are like-minded” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 4). I

realized we were like-minded, when I said, “I think what people forget is that when you help those that are the least advantaged than everybody, everybody rises” (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 13), Abby replied, “I just said that yesterday” (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 13). In that way, the group became a place of safety and comfort for us to explore our antiracist journey(s).

Talking to like-minded people should not be underestimated. First, although I did not know what each participants was experiencing in their contexts, I knew from attending the Institute for Social Justice and the New Jersey Coalition for Equity and Action that in some schools there has been fear about speaking freely, in this respect even from the beginning I acknowledged, “So in a way this is good for all of us because doing it outside of our school, it’s on our own personal time, we’re not really accountable to anybody, it’s your own personal journey and we don’t have to ask permission” (Initial meeting 8/11/22, p. 7). Second, it is in connecting with like-minded people that change can begin to happen. Abby said, “I do not believe in the whole Let’s just all have conversations because I don’t think you’d get anywhere. I think you have to start with the people who are like-minded and spread the message that way.” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 28).

I am not sure if Zoom provided protection in lieu of face to face interaction or if it was the confidentiality of talking to people outside their schools and communities but somehow our improbable community did blossom as we journeyed together. Somehow a group who started as complete strangers became vulnerable with one another. It was a strange kind of kinship because our interactions were powerful but were largely confined to our inquiry circle meetings. At the last official meeting I tried to capture the feeling, I said, “It’s strange. It’s like I know you well... like I know a lot of like important things about you like what you stand for, but we’ve not gone out to have a glass of wine or whatever” and I lamented “I’m going to miss this” (Meeting

2/27/23, p. 27) as I realized the group was ending as abruptly as it began. I wondered when or if we would see each other again. In peacemaking circle tradition, the circle is a sacred place separate from the ordinary (Pranis, 2005; Winn, 2013) for this period of time and in this small but mighty group we attempted to create a sacred space where we could be vulnerable, share our critical stories, and as our co-constructed norms suggested, “Speak from the heart” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 1). As a group we met in a space that was out of the ordinary, on Zoom, after school hours, with like-minded educators from other schools in New Jersey, in this way we worked toward this sacred space anchored together by the strong commitment from all members of the circle to antiracist and social justice work and to taking action. What I presented here may make it sound that the work of the teacher inquiry circle was effortless, but there were many tensions to navigate including how the group experienced oppression as I discuss in the next section.

Intersectionality and Ways of Experiencing Oppression

Examining antiracism in the classroom is feminist work and although antiracist teaching was the focus of this study, race cannot be separated from other relational oppressions or identities (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016). Davis et al. (2022) asserted “Abolition is stronger and more effective precisely because of its feminism” calling the connection between the two “indivisible” (p. 82). The connection between our racial and gendered identities was quite clear as we conveyed our lived experiences as women and as English teachers doing antiracist work. In this study about antiracism, race was a central concern and as such this study and this group could not be colorblind, but an acknowledgment of race was just a first step. This group could not be blind to the differing ways we experienced oppression.

The history of each collaborator began with how they self-identify in their own words. I did this, not because their race was the most important aspect of their identity, but because it was

important to me that I did not put a label or identity on my collaborators. Assumptions made about identity are typically based on appearance which can be highly inappropriate and woefully inaccurate. At one of the NJCEA meetings Alyssa described how people frequently assume she knows how to speak Spanish and are very annoyed when she tells them she does not know how to, she believed that there is something about her outward appearance that leads people to this assumption. Putting race as a first identifier for this study helped to avoid assumptions, helped to acknowledge race as a factor in the lived experiences of antiracist teachers, and it also revealed the complicated ways in which people identify themselves.

Abby identified herself as a “white American female” which if scrutinized can signify her power as a white woman over other identities. Toni Morrison (1992) quoted in Dehgan (2003) said, “In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate” (p. 19). Identifying this way did not necessarily exclude Abby from doing antiracist work, she like me will always have to contend with our privilege, however Ahmed (2017) explained, “If walls are how some bodies are stopped, walls are what you do not encounter when you are not stopped; when you pass though. Again: what is hardest for some does not exist for others” (p. 148). In using “American” as an identifier, Abby may not have realized she was “pass[ing] through” where others could not.

In addition to how the group self-identified the different ways that we experienced oppression impacted how and why we entered antiracist social justice work. Because of race, there were things that I in my dual position as researcher and participant and the entire group had to acknowledge. First, we had to acknowledge that Ashni’s and then later Alyssa’s stories as women and teachers of color would be different from mine and Abby’s as white women attempting to be in solidarity. While Abby and I had witnessed racism, Ashni’s and Alyssa’s

stories reflected their experiences with racism and microaggressions firsthand and frequently. These differences did not end with placing us in either/or categories of being a white person or a person of color, we found intersectional identities were much more nuanced. Love (2019) challenged educators “to recognize the different types of dark oppression, recognizing that all injustices are not the same” (p. 54). We all had the added factors of our gender, our social class, and other identities to impact our experiences with oppression. We were all working in a patriarchal, capitalist schools and we were all discussing racism and how to interrupt it at the personal and systematic levels (Sealy-Ruiz, 2021). Singh (2019) contended that all people regardless of their identity are harmed by racism and oppression, but Love (2019) clarified, there was an “understanding that while our life stories may have intersected and overlapped, that my darkness was a factor that further complicated my life, while her Whiteness eased hers” (p. 82).

Despite our differences, hooks (2015) called for “A vision for a sisterhood where all our realities could be spoken” (p. 58). In the teacher inquiry circle, we attempted to speak honestly and openly about our lives and our work. When I was shocked by some of the stories I heard, not only in our group but at the NJCEA meetings I had attended. I said, “just the amount of, you know, the issues that are out there. It’s far worse than I think we imagined.” My “we” was making many assumptions. Ashni replied:

I feel like I take everything as like I’m not really shocked by it. I feel like it’s very much a part of everybody’s like, thought process . . . but I feel like it I’ve always experienced it one way or another. But I’m not shocked, Like I’m not shocked with white people, with really anybody. I’m like ok well, I should expect it. Which is sad but you know, reality.

(Meeting 2/5/22, p. 7)

I experienced a lot of self-doubt particularly when I viewed my journey alongside the journeys of my collaborators. I did not possess the confidence of Abby and I had to acknowledge my complicity in the structured racism of school and society in general. So, when Ashni and Alyssa shared the level of microaggressions they experienced they forced me to confront my privilege, I admitted:

This is, this is something that, like all of us, like being a white woman that I have to really think about. This is the times that I don't put myself in other people's place or think about the extent of the, just the daily, the daily grind of having to think. It's like a privilege of mine, is not to have to think about people looking at me and saying, Are you this? Are you that? You know, what are you doing? (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 6)

In having to admit my own privileges in addition to being white, I had to examine if in fact I had been teaching in a place where for the most part blatant acts of racism were not happening. On reflection I was forced to acknowledge that it was probably not that they were not happening, it was just that they were not happening in front of me. This was extremely difficult for me to think about because I have always been so happy at my school and proud of its diversity and community and I realized I may have been oblivious to the experiences and the stories of people who were not.

I also had to acknowledge the fine line between learning in the group-from-each-other and me as a white woman learning at the expense of the negative experiences of people who identify as BIPOC (Sarigianides & Banack, 2021). Much of the literature on second wave whiteness studies reminded me to be aware of and to acknowledge my privilege but beyond that I had to actively combat that privilege that works against equity (Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Lynch, 2018; Tanner, 2019). I cannot say that hearing Alyssa's and Ashni's stories

did not elicit a response from me. It was hard to hear that these women who I was getting to know, who I respected, with whom I worked and laughed, experienced such treatment when I did not. I expressed to both Ashni and Alyssa:

Thank you as always for being, like candid. And, you know, telling me what you're really thinking. I appreciate it so much. And you know it reminds me so much about my own privilege that I don't present in a way where people question me for a lot of these things and I have to remember that, and I have to, you know, reinforce that with my children, biological and classroom as well. (Meeting 10/24/22, p.18)

I had to admit my complicity and presented to my collaborators in a way that acknowledged their pain without turning those feelings into guilt or pity which were unfair to lay on them in exchange for their honesty and emotions that could impede antiracist action (Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Singh, 2019). Instead of guilt, I was more determined to incorporate antiracism into my classroom and into my life. As Ashni's and Alyssa's individual journeys showed, feelings of pity were inappropriate and although these women have been at times victimized, they were not victims. In fact, when fighting against systematic inequities Davis et al. (2022) argued, "Women of color engaged these challenges in more complex, intersectional ways" (p. 96).

As we attempted to answer the question of how English teachers can actively work to disrupt the structures, policies, institutions, and systems that act as barriers and preserve race-based inequities in their classrooms, it was not lost on my intersectional feminist self that all of my collaborators were women. I understand that the teaching profession overwhelmingly employs women, particularly white women, so the task to fight educational inequities falls to

women, which makes sense because women fighting injustice is nothing new (Ahmed, 2017; Davis et al., 2022, hooks, 2015).

Although my collaborators were not necessarily feminists, at least they never explicitly identified themselves as feminists, they were working against power dynamics in schools and telling critical stories about their interactions in schools, interactions between men and women, teachers and administration, and between teachers and students. There were multiple examples given in our meetings explicitly saying that in a particular experience that the teacher in question was a white male without any prompting. It appeared that when my collaborators referred to white men, like Ahmed (2017), they were “referring to an institution” that acted as a barrier to their work and not all men or all white men. For example, Alyssa described the Portuguese flu interaction with “one of the English teachers who is a white male” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 19) and also identified that the equity officer for their district is “the assistant superintendent, who is also a white male” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 22) implying that a white man in that position was problematic. There were some questions from Ashni and Abby about history teachers being particularly rigid when it comes to changing curriculum and discipline and whether the fact that history teachers in their schools were predominantly white men was a reason for their rigidity and strict adherence to traditional ways of teaching. Ashni stated, “They’re all mostly at least from my experience, male teachers, who like literally don’t, don’t believe anything, but like whatever they’ve already taught” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 14). In a traditional institution like public schools, antiracism attempts to challenge the status quo and as my collaborators worked to push back on systems of power, white men became a stand in for and contributed to the barriers they faced. Identity work is crucial in antiracist work (Ebarvia, 2021; Falter et al., 2020; Wetzels,

2020) and part of our identities as women clearly impacted the way we viewed and thought about race(ism), in terms of who holds the power, and how to conduct social justice work in schools.

Even though my collaborators did not call themselves feminists, Davis and colleagues (2022) offered, “The very meaning of the term abolition feminism incorporates a dialectic, a relationality, and a form of interruption” (p. 2) and cannot be separated. Their journeys show they were doing antiracist work supported by feminist tendencies, like being people who “would be willing to speak out against racism and sexism” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 38) and collaborate to fight an unjust system. The teacher inquiry circle worked together to understand how to be antiracist, and to fight oppression in all of its forms. Regardless of our unique intersectional identities and although we were on individual journeys, we were able to bond to find “solidarity created through a shared struggle” (Love, 2019, p. 54) and build community through the sharing of critical stories.

The Power of Personal Narrative and Critical Storytelling

Although the teacher inquiry group was dialogic in nature, in our meetings more than a back and forth, our group engaged in telling and listening to long narratives and intense critical stories. As English teachers we were well aware of the power of stories. Epics, novels, memoirs, and film, we are surrounded by stories old and new, both real and imagined. Margaret Atwood (2012) said, “You’re never going to kill storytelling, because it’s built into the human plan. We come with it” (Rothman, 2012, para. 20), highlighting how innate and human storytelling is. People tell stories to connect with one another, and stories help us to reflect and to feel empathy.

Our teacher inquiry circle, even though we were not actually sitting in a circle, we were on a zoom call, and our number resembled more of a triangle than a circle, engaged in circle processes. As is typical within circle processes, which Pranis (2005) described as “a storytelling

process” (p. 4) where “wisdom in a Circle is accessed through personal stories” (p. 13), each person was given the opportunity to talk, to tell their stories. In each meeting, we gave each other equal space and the luxury of time, time we would not be afforded in school, to tell anecdotes, share incidents, and relate critical stories. Throughout our time together we would sometimes give just a quick narrative, but other times one, two, or all three of us would engage in long intense critical storytelling while the others listened.

Critical storytelling is a term that I take from Barone (1992) who said, “Critical educational storyteller is out to prick the consciences of readers” in this case listeners, “by inviting a reexamination of the values and interests undergirding certain discourses, practices, and institutional arrangements found in today’s schools.” (p. 143). He encouraged teachers to use stories for two valuable purposes: first, so teacher and student could know one another. He likened the telling of stories to “enabling them to hear, if you will, each other’s heartbeats” (p. 142) and second, as a means to liberate schools which were in much need of reform by highlighting the problems that exist within schools and school structures which were important goals of the teacher inquiry circle. Others have used this term as well, in the forward of Flores Carmona and Luschen’s (2014) *Crafting Critical Stories: Toward Pedagogies and Methodologies of Collaboration, Inclusion, and Voice*, Rina Benmayor shared:

Every personal story contains larger communal, social, and political meanings, often challenging preconceived stereotypes and prejudices. To repeat the oft-cited phrase from Chicana writer Cherrie Moraga, telling one’s story enables a “theorizing from the flesh,” transforming emotional memory into situated knowledge. Story has the potential, then, to enable everyone to become teachers and learners, of and from each other. (p. vii)

Almost as important as determining what critical storytelling is, as a Frayer model suggested, it is also valuable to determine what it is not. In no way were these stories a means of criticizing or bashing colleagues or administration for their handling of a situation; they were not for the purpose of pitying or seeing the subject or subjects of the stories as victims or seeing ourselves as saviors; and they were not a way to complain about our students, our jobs, or our lives. Based on previous uses of the term and the actions of the teacher inquiry circle, I offer my operational definition of critical storytelling. Critical storytelling is when an educator tells a personal story or recollection from their life in or out of the classroom for the purpose of understanding inequities and injustices and in hopes that these stories allow for both the teller and the listener to engage in meaning making that can lead to action.

Although in the group we did not label our sharing of these stories as critical storytelling, they just naturally became part of our meetings. I believe the way we reacted to the stories showed our understanding of their importance and our reverence for each other's words and experiences. After critical storytelling, there was usually not a lot of discussion. Sometimes there was a brief silence, and we would let the story and its implications sink in. Sometimes there was a quick acknowledgement like a "wow" usually from Abby, a "so problematic" from Ashni, or a "I don't have words" expressed by me. There was an unspoken acknowledgement that we did not need or want advice or pity, that "in a circle life experience is more valuable than advice" (Pranis, 2005, p. 13) and sometimes there was just nothing to be said. Occasionally, follow up questions were verbalized, but not always. Support was always given whether verbally or nonverbally through head nodding and active listening. When I went back and listened to the recordings of the meetings, I wished I had at times asked for more detail. For example, at our second meeting, Abby called out white privilege, and in my notes, I wrote: "Wow was this a

missed opportunity to discuss how [Abby] feels comfortable to call out white privilege?” I concluded, “I was really not ready to discuss even in this safe little group and even with this opening” (Memo 7/10/23, p. 3). But ultimately in keeping within the circle process, the belief that all members of the group were equally important, I did not want to become an interviewer, I wanted to remain in my role as a participant researcher and collaborator.

My role as participant researcher and collaborator allowed our group to continue to ponder, listen, and question. As antiracists, we knew that the work was continuous and there were no quick fixes or easy solutions to problems. We knew that we held no power in other participants’ contexts, the best we could offer was empathy, support, our open hearts, and more space for further inquiry and more stories. In the teacher inquiry circle, we engaged in critical storytelling as a way to make meaning of our praxis and our lives, meaning that we hope could lead to taking action. Throughout this chapter, I provide examples of these stories as I describe the collective journey of Ashni, Abby, Alyssa, and myself and I share examples of critical stories about discipline for our shared inquiry as well. Studying the lived experiences of English teachers on an antiracist journey of becoming, the stories of these individuals must be an integral and central part of the study. If I did not know that when the study began, I am sure of it now. It is through these critical stories and the process of telling them, we began to make meaningful connections and come to some realizations about our teaching; about ourselves and each other; and about our contexts and the world around us.

What follows are our critical stories and the meaning we try to make from them. These stories and the questions they prompted were prominent throughout our inquiry circle meetings and could come at any time, whether in response to a prompt or as part of a discussion. Here I focus on the lingering questions the critical storytelling prompted in us such as: When and how

to speak up, how to challenge and change attitudes, why equity PD was not having the desired impact, and who was doing antiracist schools and why? These stories connect and overlap and the unpacking of them is messy, but they capture the nonlinear journey of the group.

Resisting Inaction and Finding a Voice: Critical Storytelling from Ashni

In the following story, Ashni participated in a district sponsored PD at her high school about gangs. This story was in response to a question posed in the group at the beginning of our December 5, 2022 meeting. The prompt asked: Can you think of a time in school when you spoke up against something you believed was inappropriate or a time when you were silent? If you could do it over, would you change your actions? Ashni began, “So I don’t have a lot of times where I spoke up. I feel like I’m not ever in a position to argue with a whole bunch of people. But I mean I wish” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 7). She explained a recent example of staying quiet was during a professional development experience where “the school district I just started working at did a whole presentation with a cop about gang violence and gangs in schools” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 7). Ashni had already explained to us that the school is predominantly white and suburban. She laughed, “I mean I teach at [Rollings] there’s no gangs at my school. And it would be very shocking.” She continued, “Basically the principal had mentioned, you know, that the demographics have been changing and etc, etc.” and Ashni noted, “It was evident where his argument was going” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 7). She said, “There’s more diversity and they’re scared that people where the kids who are moving from like Staten Island or the city are coming in and bringing. I don’t know, gang stuff to the district” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 7). Ashni did not appreciate the deficit view of students the professional development encouraged but she kept it to herself. She offered,

And I was, I was very new like it was last year that I had just started so I kind of kept quiet. I didn't say anything until I started talking to a group of people that are also teachers and have been there forever. They were shocked. So, then I felt like okay, I'm not the only one. But one of the teachers did end up speaking out and spoke to the principal individually, but he did not react well. So yeah, everybody just kind of, you know, laid low after that. (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 7)

Although she wished to speak out during this experience, she was conscious of her status as a new teacher in the district and her positionality as “not ever in a position” to speak out (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 7). Ashni also maintained being more focused on her personal journey than any school related actions. Still, she chose to relate this particular story, about the gang PD and later one about a mandatory self-care PD she attended. To me Ashni's choice of stories highlights her desire to make changes both school related and personal, and in my mind confirms that the personal is political (Hanisch, 2006) and the two cannot be separated.

With Ashni's personal history and identity as a woman of color who lived and worked in predominately white spaces, she could not help but see deficit views, a lack of respect for diversity, and damaging injustices even when she could not or did not speak out against them. She said:

I feel like I take everything as like I'm not really shocked by it. I feel like it's very much a part of everybody's like, thought process and like, you know, in their nuclear families like they might not be as open and talking about it, I guess as people have gotten more comfortable kind of showing their, I don't know, neo-Nazi sides in the last few years, but I feel like I've always experienced it one way or others. It was a blatant

conversation that was a part of or overheard, or it was just like microaggressions.

(Meeting 12/5/22, p. 7)

Ashni was candid about the amount and frequency of experiencing or witnessing racism in and out of school. In our group, she discussed the microaggressions she herself experienced and the need she had to assimilate for most of her life freely. However, her candid, straightforward responses did not translate into being outspoken in all situations. While she could tell her mom directly, “You can’t bring your colorism, your old school like, you know, 1950s like whatever you guys thought. It’s not right” when faced with racism or microaggressions herself she called them “annoying” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 6) or even “degrading and demeaning” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 16) but she did not address the comments. When asked where she was from or when told how much people love Indian food, she said, “I don’t need to be 35 years old and explain to other 35, 40, 50 year olds anything” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 16). Most of the experiences she described happened at the school where the staff is predominately white and because it is “always white people that are uncomfortable talking about race” she said, “It’s kind of like be quiet about it and let’s keep moving, is easier to manage” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 21). It was clear that addressing the harm inflicted on her was a tension for Ashni as on the one hand she said of speaking up, “I mean I wish” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 7) but on the other hand she insisted that she would. Ashni said emphatically:

I’m not uncomfortable doing anything. . . . So yeah, like whatever, I’m gonna say it. I’ll do it and I’ll put it in like my room. The bulletin board or whatever I’ll put it in the magazine until somebody says something to me, I don’t think I will, I will not ask for permission. (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 24)

Ashni had a desire to speak up but decisions to speak up or not are difficult to navigate. Although Ashni's struggles with this decision were unique to her, she was not the only member of the group to wrestle with the decision.

To Speak Up or Not to Speak Up, That Is the Question

Throughout our journeys we all at one time or another had to decide if we should speak up about injustice or racism, or inequity that we saw, heard, or experienced. To speak up or not to speak up was a very personal decision and there were many factors to consider. Factors included when making the decision to speak or not were: who said it, where, why, and how might the speaking up be received? I offered:

I always feel like I want to speak up . . . especially in the classroom, I feel like with the other adults sometimes I'm a little more quiet. Because, you know, like, if you're in a professional development meeting, like it's a mixed crowd and like, do you want to be the one to stand up and just like, blurt something out." (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 8)

In Ashni's critical story she said teachers were upset by the PD about gangs but only one went to administration afterward to voice their concerns. Ashni herself did not feel comfortable speaking up because she was new to the school. Despite our difficulties in doing so, the importance of speaking up was very clear to us.

All members of the inquiry group agreed that if a child were being harmed, we had to speak up immediately, we had no choice. Abby said, "You're an adult, and they are the child" (Meeting 11/21/22, p. 5). There was a strong consensus that we as adults needed to protect the students by speaking up. A common thread among our varying contexts was that students often complained that even blatant racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, etc. comments that were made in class were not addressed by the teacher. In Abby's critical story the teacher said she did

not hear the comment which could be one explanation and a valid one if it were true. However, we all had stories about comments that were made that were not addressed. Abby said, “Students will know you ignored it and want to know why” (Meeting 1/9/23, p. 10) the teacher did nothing. Not addressing comments made in the classroom in front of the students did not nurture a safe environment or build trust with students (Evans & Vaanderling, 2021).

The teacher inquiry group acknowledged that teachers who heard comments in class or outside of class may not have spoken up because they lacked confidence or were unsure how to. This was true for me, I said, “I keep thinking it’s going to get easier (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 15) but I did attempt to speak up more frequently after hearing the experiences of my collaborators. Unfortunately, in one instance I found myself speaking up without considering the context or the consequences. I wrote in my researcher journal, “A student said the N word in the homeroom I was covering, and I told him it was inappropriate language in the classroom” (Journal 4/29/23, p. 28). This was the standard answer we were instructed to give by the director of DEI and usually the student would say my bad or something to that effect and it would be over. This time the student responded, “How are you (I assume he meant a white woman) going to tell me (a black man) it’s inappropriate?” In my eagerness not to be perceived as a teacher who does not address racial slurs, “immediately said, I am, that word is inappropriate, please don’t say it. And I was surprised the student did not have a comeback and went back to what he was doing” (Journal 4/29/23, p. 28). I took his compliance as a signal that I was correct, so much so that I almost congratulated myself for speaking up. I wrote, “I definitely think I was inspired by the group, and I think I would have said ‘don’t say that word’ but I don’t think I would have gone back to him if we had not talked about it in the group” (Journal 4/29/23, p. 28). It was not until much later that I unpacked this story and questioned my actions. Although, not about the N word, this

incident reminded me of a student who came to me about a poem he chose for a poetry assignment that had the F slur in it. I handled this situation very differently. I shared with the group,

And we had a conversation about do you say that word or not? And I was like, Well, you wouldn't say the N word. It is a slur. And I said, you know, I'm not a representative of that community. But I would feel like if I was, I would probably be offended. And he said, you know, as an LGBTQ person, we do get offended. Then he goes, I don't really feel comfortable saying it. I go well, then there's the answer, like 100%. Like don't say it. And then he made a point when he was reading the poem out loud to say, "I'm going to skip this word. Because I find it offensive." And it's like those little moments I feel like where kids really learn. (Meeting 1/9/23, p. 16)

The use of the N word and other slurs in school is complicated and having a set response for all students was problematic. Even though my collaborators may have felt that it was never acceptable to use the N word, Abby said, "People think they get a pass because they are something. Even like with rap music, you don't" (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 9). I questioned the use of my power as a white woman teacher to shut the student down instead of having a conversation as I did with the student with the poem. I also wondered if Abby was in my racially diverse school instead of her predominately white school if she would have thought differently. Doing antiracist work is difficult and even as our intentions were to do good, we did not always get it right. To speak up or not to speak up relied on a lot of factors including the context of the situation and we learned that it was not just a matter of if or when to speak up it was just as important to consider how and why.

Our mission in speaking up was to be antiracist not to assert power or unintentionally reinforce oppressions (del los Rios et al., 2018) nor was it to “act as an authority on a community [we]have never lived in” (Love, 2019, p. 117). Once we decided to speak up, we had to consider what we could say that would be productive and positive and how we would say it. Abby explained, “With hard conversations to, not confronting because I don't think that's the right word. I think confronting is a negative word but like I guess willing to just address comments that are made” (Meeting 1/23/23, p. 5). Again, we wanted to address racism and to change attitudes, not alienate or attack people. For example, at a SET meeting I attended we discussed test scores by categories including race and the data showed that our Asian students were scoring higher than all other groups. I shared,

A teacher who is Asian said, well you know we just care about education so much. She's like it's part of our culture and you know the DEI guy tried to like say, you know we try not to be negative and say that other people don't care about education, like the way school is structured maybe some of our Asian students can you know thrive in that environment while maybe some other people from other cultures might not be able to thrive in the structure of school. (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 14)

I noted that he was “very diplomatic” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 14) and Abby agreed, “It's just the way that you talk about it, and discuss it in a way that, the words that you pick” (2/27 meeting, p. 14). Speaking up was hard, when to speak, how to speak, and why were all considerations for the person who chose to speak up.

Speaking up could also take a toll on the person, particularly those who spoke up all the time. Ashni said, “it's annoying” to have to speak up so she did not always do it (9/26/22, p. 6). Abby always spoke up which led her colleagues to label her actions as “that's your thing”

(Meeting 10/10/23, p. 19) Making antiracism a “thing” took the focus off the issue she addressed and placed it on Abby as a problem instead (Ahmed, 2017) as if speaking out against racism was a “personal tendency” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 38) and not the responsibility of all teachers (Falter et al., 2020; Picower, 2021). When we felt we had to speak out all the time, fatigue set in and too many negative interactions jeopardizing our well-being. I said, “when you feel like you are the one who always has to speak up it’s like exhausting . . . and you start second guessing yourself” (Meeting 1/23/23, p. 6). Ashni was frustrated with the daily grind of being treated and perceived as an outsider. Whether it was looks from other parents when she picked up her kids from school, she shared, “People like have to do a double take. Because he looks like me. I mean, he looks like me, but he’s like light. so, it’s kind of like, you know, a shock and like, am I going to get offended every day?” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 6) from these experiences she described the stress induced fatigue of continuously dealing with (anti)racism (Stevenson, 2018).

We put a lot of pressure on ourselves to speak up, feeling like if we were not speaking up, we were not being antiracist. We knew we needed to always speak up when we witnessed or heard harm to a child, but at a NJCEA meeting I attended the presenter explained that sometimes it was not only alright, but it was recommended that people not speak up in a variety of situations. I said, “It was nice to be kind of given permission not to battle every single person” (Meeting 1/23/23, p. 6). The experiences of the teacher inquiry group show that speaking up is a personal choice dictated by factors both internal and external.

A lot of our opportunities to speak up were among adults including colleagues, family members, and friends. We did not want to look at our colleagues or the people in our lives through a deficit lens or as a problem to be fixed instead we focused on the opportunity to

change their perspective. There were occasions when speaking up had positive outcomes, Abby said:

I'm glad that I spoke up because I think that people at that minute might have felt a certain way but then they had to go back and think about right. . . on their own time and then come back and have discussions. I think this was a time when I spoke up and I really feel like that impacted things later. (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 6)

Abby's story, which is included in the next section, highlighted how speaking up, although difficult, can bring about change.

Teachers like us needed some assistance in our classrooms, schools, and even outside of school with speaking up, knowing when to speak up, how to speak up, and what to say were not always clear or easy. However, based on our critical storytelling the teacher inquiry circle realized that by speaking up in positive and appropriate ways, teachers and schools have the potential to develop safer communities and help eliminate or at least limit students' experiences with racist comments and other harmful discrimination. If teachers and schools opened up conversations about uncomfortable topics as the norm instead of taboo, if teachers were trained to have these conversations, and if the deficit narratives that pervade our schools can be changed, there is hope that the harmful impacts of racism can be mitigated, and students and teachers can begin to heal.

Navigating Pushback to Bring about Change: Critical Storytelling from Abby

In the following story, Abby was leading a PD session for her colleagues at the middle school. The topics were diversity and equity. As she moved through the slides in her presentation, including one about using preferred pronouns she worried would cause an issue for

some people, her audience was receptive. She told us, “Things were going great. No problem.”

Until she came to the slide that said:

Something about how we have to stop saying like we don’t see color because we want to see color because you know that like that impacts the way that we teach and the way that some people learn. Sometimes not always, but sometimes it does.” She continued, “And I had a teacher who kind of stopped and he was like, ‘Well, if I am teaching something, am I supposed to grade it differently based on that person’s color?’” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 5)

Abby quickly asked, “What did I just say that gave you the impression that that is what I meant?” Her colleagues brought up a California teacher who was fired for the way she was grading, and they just wanted to make sure they were doing the “right thing.” Abby, who had not heard about this particular teacher on the news, assured them she would look into the incident and let them know and she attempted to, as Abby put it “get back on track, at least I thought” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 5). She continued:

So, they gave me a situation and it was a test question that they were giving. The test question basically asked the students to decide out of like a whole list, like what was the like, what were the biggest problems or something that had to do with the Columbian Exchange and all of the things that were brought over to this continent, and they had to pick out like the things that had that like had the biggest impact and it was like, it went like this: crops, cattle, slaves, this that whatever and they had this big list and I was like, Okay, let’s just hold up a sec. And I’m like, here’s what I would do. If you’re asking me for my opinion. You need to separate the question into two. I’m like, take the people out of the question. Let the students pick from everything else what had like the biggest impact because it was like a negative question I said and then separately, then you’ll ask

about the people and the historical perspective. And I said to them, you don't get to have an opinion on slavery. Slavery is wrong just like you know, like, this is like the accepted like it's not okay, it wasn't okay then. And it's not okay now, historically, at the time, the perspective that they had, they might have had this perspective that let them believe that it was okay. But it was wrong then it is wrong now, so you can't have an opinion on that. And they said, 'we're not going to tell the students that they can't have an opinion.' And I was like, no, that's like this is like an acceptable thing. Like we don't. You don't get to have an opinion on whether slavery is right or wrong. Just like we all collectively agree that like the Nazis were not okay. Right. This is what I thought that we all believe that. So, thinking those things I said, you can't. . . . I had to teach this to social studies teachers, what the difference is between perspective and opinion. Like, I couldn't get over the way that this conversation went for 45 minutes. We basically, I don't want to say argued, we talked, we discussed for 45 minutes, why the children don't get to have an opinion on whether it was right or wrong, and why they should be teaching them instead about the different perspectives and how multiple perspectives shape the way that things are seen. (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 6)

As a result of this conversation Abby said,

because I spoke up, I had people who were not happy, right? I had people who went back and said that I said that they were racist, meanwhile, I didn't say that at all. In fact, it was so, not that at all. It was, so just like a discussion back and forth. And I had asked them, I said, can we just stop for a second and can we just all agree that slavery was wrong? Can we at least agree on that? And I couldn't even get them to say it to acknowledge that

because they were so afraid that if they said that, then they were going to like, like lose the argument that they were trying to have with me. (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 6)

Abby's positionality and the perception of her as the "equity person" have already been roadblocks to her equity work. Then Abby, a white woman and fellow teacher, was asked to present equity PD to an overwhelmingly white audience. Unfortunately, members of her audience were not receptive to her caution about colorblindness and her suggested way to approach a question about enslaved peoples. There was a tension when teachers were tasked with helping other colleagues understand concepts of equity. Abby recalled, "I could only do so much in my role because people wanted to know if the administration was behind this and does the administration support this?" (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 7). In this case, the PD about equity, which to Abby's surprise went awry, turned into a question of whether or not slavery was wrong. When Abby used a direct approach with her colleagues, she told them it was "an acceptable thing" (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 6) to teach that slavery is wrong. Her audience in their desire to remain neutral did not agree with her (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018). Picower (2021) discussed an "uncritical complicity" (p.7), where teachers like the group Abby was trying to educate, lacked the understanding that teaching topics like slavery neutrally instead of examining the subject and themselves critically made them "complicit in the broader system of racism" (p. 7).

In this critical story the pushback from the teachers in attendance seemed to have less to do with Abby's positionality and was more motivated by their fear of being perceived as wrong. Abby said, "They were so afraid" to agree with her because they did not want "lose the argument" (Meeting, 12/5/22, p. 6). Casey and McManimon (2021) discussed white teacher complicity and how teachers are afraid of being perceived as wrong. The teachers at Abby's PD said they were worried about doing the "right thing" (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 6) but based on

their focus on a teacher from California in the news they might really be concerned with not being in trouble for giving what they thought of as an opinion (Skerrett & Smagorinsky, 2023). So, her colleagues maybe not as blatantly as some of the offensive slavery lessons that have gone viral in the media still perpetuated a racist curriculum (Picower, 2021).

Whether the teachers in Abby's PD believed saying slavery was wrong as it was "imposing their personal political views" (Skerrett & Smagorinsky, 2023, p. 6) or if they wanted to avoid a situation that could lead to being disciplined or a subject of a story in the news was hard to determine from just this story. For me the question then that remained was what is the impact of allowing students to have an opinion about a topic like slavery? Similarly, Picower (2021) used Christopher Columbus as an example. Preservice teachers feared "moving from the official version as potential 'indoctrination' but don't recognize that teaching the *'Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria'* version is biased as well—that it is teaching the glory of imperialism" (p. 4). Letting fear of backlash inform what was taught and how it was present can lead to potential harm and perpetuate implicit bias (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018; Picower, 2021). These were exactly the outcomes Abby hoped to prevent by providing her colleagues with the equity PD.

Updating Curriculum and Attitudes: Change Is Good, Isn't It?

Meeting with a group of English teachers was like a dream come true for me. Who else could so readily throw out a quote from *Hamlet* or a quick pun? English as a content area is such a rich place for exploration because curriculum in schools and English classrooms specifically can be both a part of the (in)equity and also part of the solution. Our group discussed ways in which English as a subject and our English classrooms could be liberating while in other ways they could be oppressive and how a mandated and outdated curriculum was an issue for the group. Ashni voiced her concern, "Currently, this is my problem. It's like old curriculums with

all this old stuff that students are not interested in” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 1). We questioned who gets to choose the curriculum? What are their motivations? And how does the curriculum benefit or not benefit the students?

We discovered context had a substantial impact on the curriculum that was chosen and who chose it. Ashni explained, “I switched. I used to teach in XX which was a very diverse classroom and I had like a whole different curriculum, and I've now moved . . . and it's, it's not racially diverse” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 1). Her curriculum changed from more diverse to match the student population she was teaching at the time to more traditional when she moved to a predominately white school. This led us to questions about representation and which students were being exposed to multicultural literature and which students were not and what were the consequences? Abby, who had free reign over her curricular choices, said, “There is nothing I have to teach” and “I'm a contemporary person I want new. I don't want to do the same thing every time” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 2). Ashni agreed, “There are teachers who literally have like teachers lesson plans done from, like 10 years ago that they're just reused, I'm like first not that organized and I re do new things every year” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 3). We were using the word “new” and modern works were a part of the change they talked about, but “new” was not exclusively the age of the texts. Although, there was a discussion about the *Canterbury Tales* being old in which Ashni said, “I hate it too” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 3). Our call for new was really a call for more progressive student-centered teaching strategies like culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ohito, 2016; Thomas, 2015; Wells & Cordova-Cobo, 2021). We wanted antiracist ways of teaching with a more multicultural, culturally responsive curriculum. The feeling was that the curriculum should coincide with what the students currently in front of the

teacher wanted or needed. Therefore, the curriculum should not be fixed and static but ever evolving.

When teachers first of all have choices and secondly make good choices about the curriculum it can have a positive impact on students and their learning. When the curriculum is mandated, Abby critiqued, “They’re just the same text every time and who picks those and who decides that those are the Canon texts. I think that teachers can. They can act as a gatekeeper of the information in an English classroom.” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 2). In the hands of an antiracist teacher for social justice the curriculum, traditional or not, can be a powerful tool. As Abby reflected, “I’m going to purposefully pick different faces and different voices so that I have that to deliver my content.” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 2) and Ashni said, “I’m always trying to incorporate relevant, culturally appropriate, kind of greater world literature” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 9) but the same curriculum could also be oppressive in another teacher’s hands. If a teacher is not culturally responsive or they teach the books they love regardless of what the students want or if they focus too much on the literature in lieu of other important topics like critical inquiry and racial literacy (Skerrett & Smagorinsky, 2023) which for English teachers can be a real pitfall. Abby said, “I hate hate hate when people say, oh, I’m teaching the *Hunger Games*. Oh, I’m teaching whatever. But you’re not, that’s not what you’re teaching. You’re teaching how to read literature, how to analyze” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 3). In these cases, the curriculum will not benefit the students the way it potentially could.

Sinclair (2018) acknowledged that changing the curriculum is a valid way to become antiracist, but he warned, “That’s not as simple as swapping out the books on the shelf” (p. 91). Representation is vitally important, but it can be somewhat complicated in a diverse context like mine, and just having diverse books will be superficial if the teacher presents the book of a

minoritized group from a deficit victim lens. In Ashni's critical story about the movie *Hocus Pocus II* attitudes about diversity "now they have to change everything to make it more diverse" (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 5) invalidated the use of multicultural texts. As antiracist teachers, representation remained a high priority. Like Ashni's critical story about the movie *Hocus Pocus II*, in the spring of that year there was some controversy about the casting of a woman of color in the role of Ariel, in *The Little Mermaid*. One of my colleagues brought his young daughter to see it and of course she loved it. After seeing the new movie, she saw a picture of the classic Disney little mermaid cartoon with the bright red hair and light skin and his daughter said to him that the cartoon wasn't the real mermaid because the real mermaid, the one she saw in the new movie, has skin like her. The importance of representation cannot be underestimated.

The teacher inquiry group felt that an antiracist teacher was much more concerned about meeting the students where they were and giving them choices about what they learned than just adding random books to a curriculum. I related, I gave my AP English students a choice of which novel they wanted to read next, "one class was like we don't like 'old timey' books and they said they liked 'ethnic books' so they read *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri" (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 8) and they really enjoyed it. We also thought that an antiracist teacher gives their students opportunities for lots of different experiences. Abby offered, "connect with teachers in different places so that our kids can talk to each other" (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 2). and Ashni too wanted to get her students "out of their bubble" (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 1), and give them experience in talking about race(ism). Giving students some freedom to choose is really powerful. In these two ways, through representation and through student choice, we suggested that curriculum can be updated to be more equitable, accessible, and enjoyable for our students.

The need to update curriculum and attitudes was not exclusive to English teachers. In her critical storytelling, Abby described history teachers who were afraid to change and Ashni also related a concern about history teachers at her school, she advised:

You should be students of history, like you should know what problems arose and how people went about solving them and not just like living with George Washington back there, but like, really understanding history and how things progress and moving with the times and like appreciating change. (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 13)

There was some speculation about the reasons for their resistance, but I did not have that experience in my school where courses like African American History and Facing History and Ourselves are taught. Once again highlighting how different contexts and curriculum can either assist or impede an antiracist teacher from bringing equity to their classroom. Ultimately, regardless of the subject, some teachers cling to old curriculums and modes of teaching, and some districts are not updating their curriculum as the demographics of their school's change. Our group felt that updating both curriculum and attitudes are a necessity and teaching the actual students who are at the desks in front of the teacher is imperative.

Curriculum is one thing to update but attitudes and beliefs are quite another. In our critical storytelling, we all had examples of attitudes that needed to be updated. The real question is how to do it? Abby offered a suggestion:

listening to how every single child in that room is going to have a story to tell. And the adults, nobody asks them these things, right? The adults in the school asked the children and they heard, and they actually sat there and did not speak and just let the kids talk and listen to everything. I think it would 'change people's thought process. (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 8)

Giving students a forum to speak and not only have their voices heard but valued is at the heart of the antiracist work we were doing. As we already determined, the kids know the deficit views teachers have of them and that causes harm. Racism is harmful to everyone involved and changing attitudes is part of the healing process for all (Singh, 2019).

Although we talked quite a bit about the need to change attitudes there was no consensus about whether we were trying to educate people who were ignorant as in did not have the knowledge or information or ignorant as in rude because they didn't care to know. After her critical storytelling Alyssa offered, "So yeah, it's that kind of just ignorance that I would love to just completely obliterate" (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 17). Ashni frequently expressed "being over it" I felt she was over trying to explain and educate people, particularly those she deems as people who are educated adults and should know better. There were instances when we discussed whether or not people should know better? Is it wrong to expect a person with a PhD, as Ashni encountered, to know not to ask someone where they are from and to understand why asking is problematic (Tulshyan, 2022) or should the teacher who warned Alyssa about the "Portuguese Flu" have known better? I wrote in my researcher journal, "A congressman just used the words 'colored people' on the floor of congress yesterday. He should know better. Who should 'know better?' Is it ignorance vs lack of experience? Are these the same thing or different? (Journal 7/14/23, p. 50) Abby said, "A lot of people have this ignorance right. But some of it, that's not an excuse. It's not okay. You're adults like we have social media. We have everything at our fingertips" (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 19). We cannot have this discussion without going back to privilege. The "ability to choose when and if to think about race and racism is a white racial privilege" (Casey & McManimon, 2021, p. 155). If racism is not a part of someone's daily life what will motivate them to change? We did not have an answer to this question, but Abby

highlighted, “Once you start to battle, you're not going to win, it's not about battling, it's about easing people into those conversations” (1/23/23, p. 6). Our critical storytelling revealed that change takes time and teachers are more open to change when it is done in a positive way.

We are English teachers and English teachers know the power and impact of sharing stories. More than that, we know the influence that listening and telling our critical stories had on us. We vowed to keep working to incorporate stories and voices in our English classrooms that represented a wide variety of identities and experiences, we wanted to continue to give students voice and the opportunity to tell their stories. We also wondered if stories were the key to changing attitudes. If people heard more real stories from real people in their neighborhoods, in their teaching contexts, or other places that are very much like their own spaces in the world, would they see racism and discrimination as a widespread problem in and out of schools? Could these stories change their attitudes and possibly their behavior? My collaborators in the inquiry circle and I are not naive, there are some people who are resistant and will not change regardless of what stories they hear, what we do or what we say but we continue to be hopeful that our actions are contributing to change, and we are undeterred.

Not Taking No for an Answer: Critical Storytelling from Alyssa

In the following story, Alyssa presented an example of the pushback she has been receiving in her capacity as faculty advisor to the newly formed student-led Social Justice group, a group that she had fought so hard to start. Alyssa had a meeting with her building principal about an initiative her social justice group wanted to undertake in the school with the entire student body. She described the idea, “we're working on an antiracist chain . . . we're doing one that's so massive, I want it to wrap around the entire building” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 19). The idea for the chain came from a community building activity at a NJCEA meeting she attended at

the university with her students. Everyone at the meeting was asked to write something on a colorful strip of paper about themselves and the strips were formed into a chain and hung around the room. Her students were “super excited about it” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 19) and wanted to bring it to their school.

When she presented the idea for an “antiracist chain” to her principal, he immediately began to question her, “What do you mean? What’s going to be on it?” and she explained, “just positive affirmations, you know, and experiences that the kids have that they want to break down that stereotype” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 19). Then the principal wanted to know what specifically the students would write, so Alyssa gave him some examples, “I know one student wrote, from an experience she’s had at the school ‘Not all Hispanics are Mexican.’” Alyssa demonstrated the face the principal made and said, “he was like oh” and she continued, “I was like another one would say, ‘Not all Brazilians play soccer.’ You know, another one says, ‘we are human’” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 19). The principal told her she needed to get approval from “across the street” which is where the district offices are located. She reflected, “He was just like I don’t know. We’re gonna have to send this across the street. I need you to write up a proposal for me and give me a list of everything that would be on the chains and then we’re gonna you know, we’ll send it across the street and once I get the okay from them” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 20) then she could put up the chain. Alyssa attended this meeting alone without the students and she explained why:

I haven’t gone with them because I’m so protective of them. Like I know the shutdown I’ve gotten, like even to get the club up and running, has been an issue since July and I finally got the okay two weeks ago. So, you know, I don’t want them, although it is the

reality of the situation and what I'm experiencing, I don't want them to be met with that kind of, you know, negativity. (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 20)

She was fiercely protective of her students and wanted to shield them from the negative experiences she herself had been exposed to and at the same time she wanted to advocate for them in situations when they could not speak for themselves. Alyssa was a questioner, she interrogated the deficit views of teachers, asked to form a club on behalf of her students, and brought to light information the district was not openly sharing such as the identity of the equity officer and the purpose of the diversity group. She used her questions to advocate for her students and to identify ways to make her school more culturally responsive if not culturally reflective.

Alyssa's critical story illustrated her persistence and refusal to take no for an answer and her history reaffirmed the importance of a teacher's background, those biographical influences (Skerrett, 2008, 2009) that shape a person's beliefs but also have an impact on their teaching (Ebarvia, 2021). Alyssa's attitude toward DEI and her persistent and inquisitive qualities were formed as a young girl living in a vibrant, welcoming urban neighborhood where diversity was not only apparent, it was celebrated. In her neighborhood, people would "come together. So, race isn't really something you even think about or discuss" (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 11). Not discussing race left Alyssa unprepared for the "smack in the face" when she moved to a nondiverse community. Racial literacy can prepare young people with "the ability to read, recast, and resolve racially stressful situations" which contributed to students' well-being (Stevenson, 2018, para. 6). Although Alyssa did not have that opportunity as a child, she worked to provide her students with the opportunities she did not have. As an English teacher and advisor to the social justice student group, Alyssa attempted to provide her students with opportunities to be racially

literate, she wanted them to question as she no doubt modeled for them, but she also sought to protect them from the full reality of the pushback she was receiving. Judging from what the students wrote on the antiracist chain and their response to Alyssa's question about how the racial makeup of the faculty influenced them, the students were clearly aware of the deficit view some teachers held of them. Still with the support of their teacher, Alyssa, the students attempted to "breakdown stereotypes" and identify themselves instead of being labeled, which are important authentic antiracist actions (Colomer, 2019).

In the inquiry circle, we discussed the antiracist work that was going on in our schools. Work was being done in our schools but not all the work was authentic. In addition, it was difficult to get others to join in the work. As members of the teacher inquiry circle, we had all made a commitment to work toward becoming antiracist, throughout our time together a question that lingered was how to get others in our schools and even in our lives to also answer the call.

Beyond Performance: Who Is Doing the Work and Why?

At our meeting on October 10, 2022, we discussed whether we felt antiracist work was waning and what the causes of this decline in attention. The conversation was prompted by my purchase of a book about antiracism from the clearance rack for 91 cents. In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder there was so much activism and allyship but what happened? I asked the group, "Is this a sign of the times? When I originally started this study, I read that antiracism was going to be a buzzword for 2021 and I'm like, is it already, like waning for people? I don't know. I don't know what you think about that. Do you hear people talking about it as much?"

(Meetingn10/10/22, p. 2). Abby explained that after George Floyd's murder "after that my district kind of probably like other districts decided we were going to do all this stuff. And so we had a lot of staff things" (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 3). She continued, "I think that what we've kind

of discovered is that SEL took the place of that. So rather than seeing how those two things go together it kind of became a replacement.” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 3). Ashni concurred, “Yeah, I agree with that, too. I mean, my school is focused on this social emotional learning like hard core. And I think they forget that. There's also other things that we can worry about, and they can incorporate all of it into really thoughtful lessons or PDs for staff” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 3). This conversation drew attention to how schools moving from initiative to initiative can be detrimental to antiracism and other social justice work.

A frequent change of focus takes a toll on teachers who are already taxed so much with mandates, administration, and time constraints to contend with (Picower, 2021), why should they invest time and energy on programs or initiatives that may not be around for long. This conversation also prompted the question: are schools more worried about the optics or the latest trend instead of the ongoing lasting problem of racism and inequity in schools. Antiracist work is nothing new, but the current post pandemic youth mental health crisis adds more complexity to doing equity work today (Skerrett & Smagorinsky, 2023). Instead of abandoning equity work the connections between all types of equity work need to be acknowledged, Abby said, “I'm hoping that we can find the balance for both of those things and the understanding that everything is needed. You can't just replace things.” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 2). These complexities highlight that antiracist work should not be separated from other equity work or from the curriculum being taught in the classroom; antiracism should always be a part of the conversation.

In addition, antiracist work and all equity work have to be authentic and strive to make a difference in the lives of students. We all talked about initiatives at our schools of which we were proud, that provided us with hope, and brought about change. In the social justice project I conducted at my school, “Building Empathy: Telling Stories,” students engaged in a process of

personal storytelling as a way to build community and empathy. After participating in their first story exchange, students were asked to write one word on a post-it note as they left the room to describe how they felt after their storytelling experiences. They used words like “free,” “seen,” and “relieved” to capture what they were feeling (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 3). Abby described, “We just had on Saturday, there was a unity festival. And it was wonderful . . . there was singing, and a speaker . . . it was just great” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 22). On the other hand, performative actions, as the name suggests, are not as authentic and done for the benefit of the person participating as much as for the cause. Abby described some of the equity work at her school in this way. She said, “That is performative, I use the word all the time I’m like, could we stop it with the performative like, you know, equity stuff” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 14). Performance “leads to engagement in easy, visible and costless actions that do not challenge the status quo” (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023, p. 18) and are in other words safe. For all the authentic actions we and our schools were taking, there were an equal or a greater number of superficial actions, like door decorating and crafts and under scrutiny we questioned the purpose and sometimes the validity of these initiatives. When I told the group that in the first year of the SET the committee wanted to make totem poles for Native American Heritage Month, Ashni said, “that was not right when I was young” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 15). In other cases, the implementation fell short of the intentions and the veneer of authenticity was wiped away. Abby’s school had a designated “advisory time,” specifically “it was pitched that we could use the time for SEL for our celebration of equity and you know, awareness and all of these things, everything that like we had hoped we could have in all classrooms” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 15) but Abby said, “So far there has really been nothing of substance. It has turned into SEL stuff, just kind of being nice to each other . . . being nice is not

being antiracist. It's not the same" (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 15). She did clarify later that with some prompting the advisory periods began to improve.

As a group we discussed all types of contests where participation was geared towards someone winning something and multiple opportunities to showcase antiracist and social justice work in and outside of our schools. Even at the university level, for all of the good work the NJCEA was doing, they awarded prizes to the students for the best equity project. We had to ask, should equity be a contest? We also questioned the purpose of all of these showcases. I was scheduled to present at three end of the year showcases myself. It was not that I thought presenting the good antiracist work schools and communities were doing lacked validity, I worried the importance of the showcase might overshadow the work it was designed to promote. I explained:

The showcase, that's not a bad thing but the purpose shouldn't be to have something good to show at the showcase, to show the parents. The purpose should be to do something worthwhile. And then if you can show it to the parents, that's a good thing. So . . . when it's like, you know, why are we doing this? Oh, that would be great for the showcase. But is it great for the students? (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 15)

Even performative acts can have some benefits. Kutlaca and Radke (2023) argued that "performative allies can contribute to social change by increasing awareness and reinforcing egalitarian norms and values" (p. 18). Our critical stories prompted us to look closely at antiracist work being done in our schools and ask: who is doing the work and why?

For ourselves explicitly discussing our antiracist journeys together, these questions were more easily answered. We examined our identities and histories and were committed to the work and based on these factors were committed to doing the work even if our motivations were

different. Our overall purpose was to continue being social justice teachers by working toward becoming antiracist, but to figure out how to get people “on board,” to “buy in” or to “join” was a lot harder to determine. As teachers who are already social justice oriented, we were open to professional development, we serve on our DEI committees and School Equity teams and advise social justice clubs. We even, as evidenced by the inquiry circle itself, were willing to take action outside of school but we wondered how we could reach others who were either not passionate about the work or maybe didn't even see a need for antiracist or equity work in schools at all. I said, “I feel like being on the committees and everything and, you know, with the university program [NJCEA] and the school equity team. I feel like we are getting all the training, but it's not trickling down to like everybody (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 11). Abby and Ashni had similar experiences. Abby said, “I feel like we just keep preaching to the choir and it's the same people each time” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 11). Ashni added, “It's like you said [Abby] it's like five people that would have done the work, or participated, or believe already. But you know whatever. It's better than nothing” (12/5 meeting, p.11). It is better than nothing, but we thought about ways to get others involved, because our group, although realistic, could never be that negative.

As already stated, beginning with like-minded people first and then working from there can be a good strategy. Abby reiterated, “I just feel like it's really important, I feel like you need to network, and you need to talk to other people. You need to talk to like-minded people” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 28). We recognized these like-minded people in our schools, they were the ones we described as, “stretched too thin” (Abby, Meeting 2/27/23, p. 25) and “she's got a lot going on” (Ashni, Meeting 10/24/22, p. 25). Although we believed equity work is the responsibility of all teachers and everyone who works in schools (Love, 2019; Picower, 2021; Skerrett & Smagorinsky, 2023; Wetzal, 2020), clearly that was not a widely held belief. One of

the major roadblocks that we encountered when trying to encourage more people to do antiracist work was that people did not feel like the work pertained to them. Ashni said,

From personal, like observations, I feel like, at the end of the day, it comes down to people saying well does it really affect my daily life. And the answer is usually no and so, they just kind of go like okay, well I know a little bit I know about it. I did my part and I'm kind of done. (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 3)

Abby added, "It's because of privilege. That's exactly what privilege is. They have the privilege to not make that" commitment, to attend that book club, or to get involved in that initiative, "that's what it is" (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 3). These comments were offered as a way to understand the issue and think about ways to make changes. So, if people did not feel connected to or responsible for antiracist work beyond the mandatory PD schools and districts were offering, what would change their minds? This was a huge and lingering question for us, and we wondered about the connection between antiracism and equity work and professional development.

Problematic Professional Development: Critical Storytelling from Ashni and Me

In her story Ashni had a professional development (PD) experience that meant to bring awareness to the staff about teacher self-care. During the three hour long self-care professional development which Ashni described as, "the worst thing I've ever sat through . . . it wasn't even useful" (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 17) the staff was subjected to a mandatory yoga lesson. This story came from a discussion about actions that our school equity teams were taking, but our conversation digressed to the topic of cultural appropriation. Although it was about self-care it was three hours long and Ashni explained, "like forty minutes of it was this woman doing yoga with us" (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 17). Ashni described feeling "uncomfortable" and not wanting to

do yoga poses like downward dog in front of people including men with whom she worked. She set the scene:

And there were like, you know, older people or people who couldn't like do the poses. So, they were sitting in chairs behind us, and I'm doing it like I'm following along because I'm very compliant. And so, she's like, do downward facing dog right? I'm looking back and I'm like there are these guys sitting behind me and I'm like, suck it up and do it. And then one of my friends was like, did you like being culturally appropriated back there? Like, I don't even think these women knew where yoga comes from . . . it was three hours, it was the worst. (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 18)

Ashni, self-described as “compliant,” was subjected to PD that can only be described as uncomfortable and problematic. In fact, both of the PD experiences that she related were ineffective and inappropriate albeit for different reasons. Particularly problematic is PD that is meant to promote equity and instead reifies inequity. Like Ashni, I shared such a story. The following story relates a reaction I had to a slide show I viewed as part of the district's monthly affirmative action topic. The slide shows are posted, and staff members view them on their own. This particular month the topic was: socioeconomic status and on one of the slides it said that socioeconomic status impacts the number of words a child will hear. When I read the slide, I remembered reading about a word gap in one of my doctoral classes. When I discussed it in the group I said “30,000 words” but in the study I was thinking of, Hart and Risley (1995), it was actually 30 million words. I remembered that research was controversial, and I reacted to the slide immediately. It is important to note that I have no idea if the research I thought of is the actual research referenced on the slide.

I recounted the experience, “This month's topic was about socio economic status. And it was all these facts about kids and poverty. And I don't know if you've ever heard of the 30,000 word study, there was a study done and it said that if you live in poverty, you hear like 30,000 less words.” I explained, “So that study has been pretty much debunked over time. It's like one of those, it's like being cited constantly in research. . . . But it was done on, like 16 families, so it wasn't like an extensive study.” I continued, “So I read this affirmative action thing, and it was like, students who live in poverty, it said, current research says that students who live in poverty hear, but it didn't say 30,000, But it said hear less words like vocabulary than other students . . . and it just seems like a ridiculous thing” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 18). I worried about the impact of presenting information, which was from a possibly debunked study. I said, “now a whole group of the faculty are walking away going, oh, these poor kids have not heard many words. When, what in the world are you talking about? Like people don't talk” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 18). This happened right after an NJCEA meeting where we had a conversation about discourse, I explained:

We were talking about how in some cultures, like talking a lot is part of the culture right? Discourse and like talking is more important than writing or other, you know, modes of communication, like they're all about oral, you know, transference of knowledge and things like that. And I was just like, I cannot believe it. (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 18)

I also shared,

We do an exit slip every month. I have to show that we like kind of went over it. I put a whole thing in there about how I hope it's not referring to this study because it's not current. It has been debunked. And then I'm like, does anybody actually read these exit

slips? Or are they just like check to see if you have signed off on them? It's like checking. You know, check the box.” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 19)

As my critical storytelling showed, I was conscious of the messages that were being disseminated to staff in district sponsored PD and acknowledging that to be antiracist there cannot be any box checking or performance.

Equity PD has to be accurate and lead to teacher learning. PD came up quite frequently within our inquiry circle meetings. It was clear that all PD was not created equally, and that equity PD was not having the intended impact.

All Professional Development Is Not Created Equally: What's with All the Book Clubs?

As teachers we have all been there, we get the email, we are told the time and the date, given a topic and expected to show up, prepared, ready to engage, enthusiastic even. It's time for professional development. As Ashni's and all of our critical stories showed, not all PD was created equally. When it came to PD regarding antiracism and DEI, which included antiracism in all of our contexts, like all teacher PD, there were several factors that contributed to its effectiveness. Contributing factors such as: Who is providing the PD? Is it mandatory? Who is the target audience? How big is the audience? What is the format? (e.g.: lecture, training video, interactive workshop), and is there buy-in from the teachers? When discussing if DEI training was still necessary, Abby offered, “You would like to think that it wouldn't be necessary anymore, but that's just not the reality” (Meeting 2/27/22, p. 13). Although some strides have been made, there was still a need to move beyond definitions of terms and support teachers to take more action, to know when and how to speak up, to change their attitudes from deficit thinking to growth mindsets as we have already discussed, and to other actions such as to update their curriculum and stop resisting change, which I discuss in a subsequent section.

While the PD we were already experiencing had some benefits, we still wanted more. It was clear from Ashni's yoga experience and her PD about gangs that not all PD was as beneficial as it was intended to be and like the other ways of doing antiracist work risked being performative or worse disseminating inaccurate or harmful messages. Coincidentally we all had yoga experiences. Abby had a yoga for mindfulness experience similar to Ashni's PD. She too was worried the activity was cultural appropriation, she said, "I was like something about this just does not feel right. And I was like, alright, maybe it's maybe I'm being overly dramatic . . . you are taking something that you don't, you don't know the background of this, you don't know anything about it." (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 18). I attended a yoga class at school, and I too was "uncomfortable," but the difference was this experience was voluntary and we did yoga "because it's Indic heritage month. So as part of our school equity team, it's one of the things we're doing that honor Indic heritage, so yoga comes from India. So, we have this woman come in to give this yoga class to teachers and students" (Meeting 1/9/23, p. 5). Good intentions are important and certainly a staff appreciates being treated to mindfulness activities, the problem arises when the audience and their feelings are not taken into consideration. PD like any instruction should be culturally responsive and teachers are adults and professionals and need to have a say in what they learn, how they learn it, and why they are learning it, just as students do.

In my critical story about the word gap, I remembered reading about the word gap, I told the group, I remember thinking how, "a whole group of teachers" were given a deficit view of "these poor kids" (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 18). Abby summed up the problem of pointing out deficiencies in students in the name of equity. She said, "And again, thinking about the framing, right? The framing of it, like what is the point behind that. The point behind that is that if the kids don't have knowledge of language, it's going to affect everything in the future, right? . . .

But to tie that into something like that is just again, it's just it's like that whole deficit thinking again” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 18). Regardless of intention, deficit messages get internalized particularly if they are sanctioned by administration as with Ashni’s gang PD. It is particularly important that administration supports a positive view of students and disseminates accurate information to support teachers. Part of equity PD sometimes tried to educate teachers about how specific groups experience inequity in efforts to be more culturally responsive. In these efforts it was important to remember there is no single story and not to remarginalize students based on their culture or factors outside their control (Sarigianides & Banack, 2021; Sassi & Thomas, 2008).

In addition to the content of the professional development, how it was presented was an issue we saw that may have contributed to getting staff on board. Sometimes districts use videos or slideshows to train their staff. Abby said, “yes, 400 million videos” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 20). Although hyperbole, it underscored the feelings of burnout teachers felt from watching training videos. For some policies or training it may have been effective to watch a quick video, sometimes it was just to refresh memories or reiterated procedures. What was clear to us through our critical storytelling was that with antiracism and the need to change attitudes short video or slideshow format framed the work as just another policy to acknowledge instead of an area that needed change and required action. Abby’s critical story highlighted the need for interaction, if the history teachers at her PD just read the slide show they would not have asked the questions or had the discussion that they had which Abby believed “impacted things later” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 6). Even if the PD had been in person, it did not guarantee that it would have a strong impact. I wrote in my researcher journal, “PD in an auditorium with like 500 people –Not good” (Journal 7/23/2023, p. 61). Even though I sat up front it was difficult to focus and hear with so many

people in such a large space. I also have attended many PDs and have studied antiracist teaching but in these large groups there was no way to create a brave space for discussion (Arao & Clemmens, 2013) and no differentiation of instruction. Abby agreed, “I feel like we just keep preaching to the choir” and then there are “Some people like that would be the first time they were hearing that, that would be new information for some people. And that’s really sad” (Meeting12/5, p.11). We found that antiracist and DEI training require a much more nuanced approach than typical PD.

Book clubs were another common form of PD. Several times throughout our meetings book clubs were discussed as a way to train staff and take action. In fact, book clubs were mentioned over twenty-five times in the meeting transcripts. We all at one time or another were a part of or planning to be a part of a book club. Still feeling the sting of Johnson’s (2020) words, “white people just join a book club,” I was wary when book clubs were mentioned and mentioned so often. Through our conversations it was clear that not all book clubs were created equally. Mandated book clubs, just as when PLC and PD were mandated, were less effective, but if these clubs were not mandated there was much less attendance. In both mine and Ashni’s restorative justice book clubs there were less than 10 people when the entire staff of our respective buildings were invited to join. What was also problematic was when forming a book club, the entire action was just reading the book. However, when book clubs lead to further action they were a helpful and valid place to start, to educate ourselves about topics and ideas we wanted to know more about, and to meet with colleagues who were either like-minded or at least curious. Abby explained,

Then they want to have a conversation where they kind of like bounce around ideas from both book clubs, which I thought was kind of interesting because they are looking to

expand their knowledge. Not just one thing. They want to kind of look at multiple perspectives which is great. (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 11)

Reading, discussing, and sharing perspectives are all positive actions. Falter et al. (2020), in their steps to becoming antiracist, suggested reading as the second step. I found the literature review for this study a time of reading, reflection, and new understandings. But in these cases, reading was a beginning action, not an ending action. Johnson's (2020) words sting because they are true. White people do have privilege: we can join a book club and learn and signal that we are supportive and care but not have to live with or deal with the experiences that students are having in classrooms each day (Love, 2019). Ashni suggested, "They just kind of go like okay, well I know a little bit about it. I did my part and I'm kind of done because it takes a lot of work. It's like daily work, you know" (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 3).

There was also the issue of who was presenting the PD. I was surprised that in Abby's critical storytelling that she was the one giving the PD. I have asked the question many times in SET meetings, "why does the district never utilize us for staff development," but I began to see how problematic it may be because it may cause breaks in the school community. Abby pointed out that PD from colleagues was not always welcomed. At the middle school she was known as the equity person, even though she was knowledgeable and passionate, when she tried to share her knowledge and passion, she experienced pushback. She related,

I could only do so much in my role because people wanted to know if the administration was behind this, and that the administration supported this and all of those things. They always wanted to know that, so as much as they listen to you, they only want to listen to the part that they have to do. Right Is it mandatory that I do this. (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 6)

In my researcher journal I wrote, “Colleagues are okay with the celebration of diversity, but when it comes to changing thinking or long held beliefs like being raised to not see race is polite and the right thing to do, they are less receptive especially when it comes from a colleague” (Journal 7/12/23, p. 48). Once Abby was promoted to vice principal, she noticed a change. Originally, she worried the high school faculty would see her as “elementary” and not listen to her, but she said, “I don't get the pushback, but I feel like I got when I was like a colleague. I don't know. It's, it's like, a little bit weird” (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 7). Although it was great that they were receptive it was not lost on us that her position of power gained their acquiescence. Antiracist and equity work is difficult, even for those in positions of authority. Abby was open about her knowledge but Ashni's critical story about the gang PD reminded us that not all administrators are. When the administration was approached about the gang PD Ashni said, "he did not take it well" (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 7), essentially shutting down teachers. Fear of being shut down, ineffective methods, and questionable content can be a roadblock for teachers and prevent them from showing up enthusiastically for PD about antiracism and equity. There is so much literature about quality PD that is not transferring to the PD being done in schools. How best to provide quality equity PD is a huge area for education research, consideration has to be directed at the message, who is delivering it, and in what way.

The purpose of PD should be to benefit and support teachers as they grow in their practices and in their understanding of how best to support their students. PD for antiracist and equity work is no exception, but the stakes for such work are higher as racism is doing harm in classrooms every day and teachers need support so they can learn and grow. In the teacher inquiry group, we were attempting to learn and grow on our own outside of our school PD.

Engaging in Shared Inquiry: Coming to a Consensus

In order for our group to be considered practitioner action research there had to be some action to bring about change and the understanding that “action research is generally not done *on* participants it is done *with* participants” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 51). To add, I wanted our PAR to be FPAR so instead of considering the people involved as participants, I considered them more as collaborators who shared the power and the decision making. It was my desire and intention for all members of the circle to have an equal say in when we met, what we discussed, and what we as a group wanted to know more about, our shared inquiry. To these ends, consensus was a key factor. Leavy and Harris (2019) suggested consensus as one of four central ideas for feminists doing action research along with commitment, community building, and working collaboratively. Initially, Ashni and Abby would ask me what I wanted to do or what I wanted them to do, which made sense. I held the role of practitioner researcher, and I was conducting the study, but eventually we were able to co-construct and come to a consensus about our topic, restorative justice practices, and how we would explore the topic through shared inquiry.

There are multiple reasons why the group was resistant to co-construction. We are all very polite people, as Ashni suggested, “compliant” even. We are all for the most part laid back; we have strong opinions to share but during our time together none of us was overly demanding. Maybe we were all just indecisive or maybe no one wanted to make decisions at 7 pm on a Monday night and preferred to just be told what to do. Whatever the reason or for all of these reasons, it took some time to work up to our shared inquiry. At one point, I started to think they thought I was just unprepared. I explained to them that as a feminist researcher and because of

the methodology of the study I needed their input and wanted to share power with them. I explained:

Even though the study is not feminist . . . my research methodology is feminist. So, in that I have to have your input on everything. I can't just take charge and be like, this is what we're doing. So, some people might think that, you know, is this woman ill prepared, she doesn't know what she's doing. but it's very purposeful. We're all equals here and everybody has a voice and a say. (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 4)

This explanation was helpful for them, and we began to work toward a consensus. As part of our shared inquiry, we needed to decide on a topic, and I suggested we decide on an inquiry protocol to guide how we were going to conduct this inquiry which the group agreed made sense. As with journaling the group was less interested in choosing a protocol, it did not matter at all what process we used or how we labeled it. Still instead of choosing for them, I supplied three inquiry protocols to choose from. We settled on a simple graphic organizer that listed our Knowns and Unknowns, our question(s) for inquiry, how we will investigate the inquiry, and our plan of action. Pranis (2005) stated, "Decisions in a Circle are made by consensus. Consensus does not require enthusiasm for the decision or plan, but it does require that each participant is willing to live with the decision and support its implementation" (p. 13). Although we had reached consensus about which inquiry protocol to use, we struggled to choose a topic for inquiry for quite a while.

At the end of our first meeting, I already started asking, "Do you have any ideas about things you would like to attempt to do or lines of inquiry you want to explore in our time together?" (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 4). They were already clear on what they were doing and wanted to do individually but for our shared inquiry much like choosing a protocol, there was a need for

consensus, but no one wanted to pick. Abby began, “Well do we want to focus on the students or on the staff and the school?” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 8). Ashni worried about working at a school level, she shared, “Yeah, I mean, I don’t really have that power” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 8) so we were thinking about something in our classes. Each meeting we brought it up, put it off, and said next time. At the end of one meeting I said, “think in the back of your minds when you’re not raising your kids, fighting administration and microaggressions on a daily basis. Think about if there is some inquiry or if there’s something that we want to know more about that we could do together as a group (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 24). Then Ashni said, “I joined this book club at my school, I guess it’s the school’s PDP, but it’s called *The Little Book of Restorative Justice*” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 24). The fact that it was a school wide initiative made it easier for Ashni to take action. It was like we all immediately knew that restorative justice was the topic for which we were waiting, and this time came to a consensus more enthusiastically. Having chosen a protocol and a topic, we were ready to take some action.

Shared Inquiry Is a Challenging Part of Our Collective Journey

As described previously, our small but mighty group developed into a community fairly quickly for a group of strangers. Our dialogic group engaged in check-ins, informal conversations, discussions about race(ism) and antiracism, our individual initiatives in our schools, and critical storytelling as we progressed on our individual journeys alongside one another. However, there was another part of our story, it was our collective journey, and this part included the story of our shared inquiry and some common beliefs that emerged from our conversations and stories. Our collective journey was predicated on the beliefs that racism is harmful to everyone (Picower, 2021; Singh, 2019) as it “not only adversely impacts the learner but also a teacher’s humanity” (Navarro, 2020, p. 157), everyone benefits from antiracism and

diversity (Dunn & Love, 2020; Falter et al., 2020; Navarro, 2020; Picower, 2021; Sinclair, 2018), and it is the responsibility of all people but particularly those who work in education to create more equitable and safe schools where all students can learn (Love, 2019; Picower, 2021; Skerrett & Smagorinsky, 2023; Wetzel, 2020) and being like-minded help us form a community.

The shared inquiry part of our collective journey was somewhat different, it was not always at the forefront of our meetings nor was the shared part easily attained or defined. Like our individual journeys, our collective journey was best described as nonlinear and messy. One issue we encountered was that coming to a consensus proved more challenging than I anticipated. Typically, our conversations flowed without much prompting, but when I asked the group to engage in more structured inquiry (e.g.: journaling, choosing a protocol) they seemed less open. These were the times that the limitations of the study were most evident.

Although we eventually agreed on the topic of restorative justice and our co-constructed questions were agreed upon, we came to our shared inquiry from different starting points in our knowledge and we moved forward at our own pace within the context of our own schools. We were having small victories in our classrooms by making curricular choices and using literature to discuss race, but what could we do in the greater contexts of our schools and how could our shared inquiry help which became another of the difficult questions we wrestled with. There may be those who question whether studying English teachers from a variety of contexts is valuable because the findings will not be generalizable. There may be doubt about whether our shared inquiry was practical or effective because our actions would be separate, but generalizability was not the goal of the study or the purpose of our journey(s).

The value of working together in a group such as this comes from doing the difficult work alongside others who were willing to do the work as well. The antiracist social justice work of

each individual was enhanced through the discussion, shared inquiry, and critical storytelling that the group engaged in during our time together. In an inquiry circle “everyone is both a giver and a receiver. Circles draw on the life experience and wisdom of all participants to generate new understandings of the problem and new possibilities for solutions.” (Pranis, 2005, p. 6) which was very much reflective in our group as we explored the issue of traditional school discipline.

The feminist practitioner action research we undertook using our teacher inquiry circle proved to be an apt vehicle to question how we were disrupting structures, in this case traditional school discipline, and for exploring our lived experiences as teachers who experienced pushback and lingering questions on a journey to becoming antiracist. Using a racial literacy framework as “an understanding of the powerful and complex ways in which race influences the social, economic, political, and educational experiences of individuals and groups” (Skerrett, 2011, p. 314) our collective journey showed how as a group we attempted to understand these complexities and find ways to work against the status quo.

Attempting to Take Action: Restorative Justice

When the topic of restorative justice was suggested by Ashni, Abby and I immediately agreed. They both had strong feelings about discipline. Ashni said, “Teachers who are like no rules, rules, rules, like what are you talking about?” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 13) and I was curious about the possibilities. According to the book, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice in Education: Fostering Responsibility, Hope, and Healing in Schools*, that Ashni and her book club and later I read, Evans and Vaanderling (2022) defined: “The term restorative justice in education can be defined as facilitating learning communities that nurture the capacity of people to engage with one another and their environment in a manner that supports and respects the inherent dignity and worth of all” (p. 22). We had already been working together in the inquiry

circle and experiencing circle processes; we had all noted and discussed how students were viewed through a deficit lens often in regard to discipline; and some of the beliefs for restorative justice in the worthiness and the connectedness of all humans and core values of “respect, dignity, and mutual concern” (Evans & Vaanderling, 2022, p. 23) all were an excellent fit with our specific antiracist goals and our teaching for social justice sensibilities.

Once we had reached a consensus on the topic and our inquiry protocol, we quickly moved forward, first focusing on what we already knew about restorative justice. Our initial knowledge varied greatly, Ashni described:

Instead of like calling kids problematic or you know distractions . . . they're really kind of trying to, at least from my understanding, come up with a solution like to really understand the problem . . . and then coming up with a solution that's working with them, not like against them. (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 13)

Ashni knew that the discipline in her school was not working, she observed:

I do hear like there's a lot of issues with, like discipline, techniques that don't work. Like kids are late, and then they get another like a detention, they don't go to that detention, then they get a suspension, and they get an in school, out of school, blah, blah. so, it's like a lot of things that don't work. (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 12)

Her school was already starting to focus on discipline and Ashni had already joined a book club to explore how they might use restorative justice in their school. Even though she said, “As for discipline issues, I don't have, really any in my classes” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 12) she was able to choose restorative justice for her Professional Development Plan (PDP).

Abby was at the point where she was already trying to implement restorative justice practices in her context and having some success. Abby believed, “The whole point of discipline

should be that it changes the behavior and not just dishing out punishment” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 13). An important part of the practice is repairing the harm (Maynard & Weinstein, 2020). In her critical story below, Abby demonstrated restorative practices when she described how she met with parents and a teacher after a discipline issue involving their child was not handled the way the parents believed it should have been handled. Without restorative practices it would have been unlikely that the parent would have reached out to the teacher with questions about their child because of the negative experience. Getting the offended parties in the room together cleared the air and made it possible for the parents and teacher to work together again.

I admitted that I did not know much about the actual nuts and bolts of how restorative justice worked in schools. Some of the participants I had met at the Institute for Social Justice over the summer had made it their social justice project, so I knew what it was. But I explained:

I read a little bit about like, just from the Native American tradition, peace circles and things like that. And a lot of those, like tenets, are what are the basis of restorative justice. So, I learned about some of that stuff, but I haven’t really, actually tied it to anything about tying it directly to discipline. It was more about community building and voice. (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 17)

I asked an administrator in my building if we were using restorative justice practices, based on our conversation I wrote in my researcher journal, “Our code of conduct we use. There are specific violations to the code and specific punishments. . . . He just asks that administrators and counselors think restoratively instead of punitively, but the system is not set up for restorative practices” (Journal 2/5/23, p. 17). What I read about circle processes and peacemaking traditions confirmed this. My understanding was that restorative practices take a major shift in attitudes and ways of being for the whole community and school structures were

not the flexible places necessary to implement the practice (Evans & Vaanderling, 2021). In the group I reflected:

I'm reading the book and I'm just, I'm just feeling like the way schools are set up and like [Abby] said code of conduct and all that it's like at cross purposes with like restorative justice and even antiracist and antibias education, like all the things that we're trying to do our social justice work like that big umbrella social justice. It's like, schools are neoliberal, patriarchal. It's like how do you do the work within that container? That's like fighting you all the time? (Meeting 1/9/23, p. 17)

This question went to the heart of the work and became a major focus of our shared inquiry. After we discussed what each of us knew about restorative justice, we summarized and recorded what we understood as a group on a graphic organizer. I offered to act as scribe for the group, I wrote: “changing the narrative around discipline; not calling students problematic; coming up with the solutions; students are not the problem, the system is a problem; discipline to change behavior, not punishment” (Meeting 12/5/22 p. 13). We had some strong ideas about discipline but what did we want to know? Our questions for inquiry were: How can we introduce and implement restorative justice practices in our respective schools? How do we change mindsets in our schools about discipline? These questions were a combination of all the questions that all three of us had had about restorative justice. The biggest unknowns were how to get student buy-in and have them take it seriously and how to get staff from all departments to believe in its effectiveness and its merits.

In respect to students Ashni shared, “one of my co teachers . . . he did restorative justice at the school he was at previously . . . And he said that It's wonderful if it works, and if the students take it seriously, like if the student will come and see you” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 15). We

wondered what would prevent students from having a conversation in lieu of going to detention. Ashni questioned, “I don't know if many students would like not talk to somebody instead of go to detention or get ISS like that doesn't seem logical to me” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 15). I asked, “I wonder if they already have a lack of trust for administration?” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 15) many of these students may have already made up their minds based on the treatment they have received. Abby added, “The way that we have certain staff members who continuously write up the same kids. So, when the kids say they're picking on me like yeah you are right” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 29). Getting students to buy in will require time to build trust and create a climate that embraces restorative practices (Evans & Vaanderling, 2021). We hoped our study of restorative practices would help us figure out how to create that climate of trust in our schools.

With respect to teachers, Abby asked, “I want to know how you get the staff to believe this.” In her new position as vice principal, she had some first-hand experience with the staff's attitude toward discipline.” She described, “In the beginning when I was having conferences with the kids... they said well why don't you give them detention?” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 13) believing that if there were no punishment there was no discipline (Evans & Vaanderling, 2022). In another instance Abby shared, “We had an incident today where a teacher basically harassed a student, like followed him into the bathroom to yell at him” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 29). A teacher feeling like they have a right to confront a student even if it means following them into the bathroom is a total power move and unacceptable.

We all knew shifting attitudes was going to be a challenge, deficit lens which was a common subject of our critical storytelling will be discussed later section but for now Evans and Vaanderling (2022) questioned, “Do we believe that children and youth are miniature adults with a fully developed rational capacity to understand their choices and actions, or do we view them

as people whose capacity to understand is still developing?” (p. 38). Clearly restorative justice required that teachers believed the latter. Beliefs about discipline and deficit views are deeply ingrained. In a meeting with teachers that was not about discipline at all, Abby shared, “There was something to the effect. Something about, like the kids not caring whatever. And the kids who do care, they do better and all this stuff. And it was like, they kind of were tying it into like referrals and behavior” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 16). We knew getting buy-in and changing attitudes about student behavior were going to be major obstacles, and still we were hopeful and willing to start our inquiry plans.

Our plans for exploring our questions for inquiry were to read, research, and to attempt some of the suggested activities from our reading. Specifically, Ashni and I were going to read the same book, and Abby was going to continue to implement and show through results that restorative practices can work. She said, “My thing is to make people realize that punishment is not the answer. That’s my mission” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 16). She continued, “I think it’s about changing the narrative, changing the culture. To want discipline to be more restorative right? To help them restore culture, restore all of the stuff” (Meeting 12/5/22, p.16). We all agreed that changing deficit thinking and negative attitudes to more positive views and a growth mindset (Maynard & Weinstein, 2020) for both staff and students were the biggest challenges for our attempts to implement restorative justice practices in our classrooms and schools.

We all also agreed that as antiracist teachers we needed to examine discipline through a racial lens. We did not need studies of the disproportionate disciplining of students of color to know this was true. Abby said, “I have already seen that there is a, a definite pattern. And I’m definitely seeing that there are certain groups of people who feel that they are picked on and targeted more than others” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 12). Like Navarro (2020) who found in his study

of a teacher inquiry group, “some of the teachers engaged in a pedagogical practice of resistance towards school-wide discipline policies that punished youth of Color” (p. 163). Our group also discussed pushing back on policies. For example, we discussed the dress code as a policy we resisted enforcing. I agreed, “it’s not equal about who gets called out on what issue and there is a lack of consistency with the staff” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 16). In regard to dress code Abby agreed, “Like really’ That’s what we’re gonna worry about?” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 16). With all of the work that needs to be done in schools, policing what students were wearing was a very low priority for us. Abby also discussed how she was not going to prioritize disciplining students for lateness. She said, “We just had a faculty advisory board meeting at the school today and they wanted to know, what’s the turnaround on referrals for like lateness? And I’m like, when I get to it. If it is not changing behavior, I guess it’s not at the top of my list. I’m just not going there” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 13). In these small ways, we attempted to pushback on policies that were unfair, targeted specific groups, and did not change behavior.

While we were pretty optimistic and excited about the possibilities, we questioned the long process of changing traditional ways of discipline. Ashni shared that a member of the child study team in her district is attempting to hold restorative justice conferences with the students she comes into contact with, mostly students with IEPs. She said, “But then she wants to make it bigger and kind of hopefully include the whole school, but I don’t know how many years realistically it’s going to take” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 12). The wheels of change were slowly beginning to turn at my school as well. By the end of the 2022–2023 school year, a group of seven teachers and one administrator decided to form a book club to learn more about restorative justice and how we might implement restorative practices in our school. Three years after Johnson (2020) questioned white people for just joining book clubs here I am again. Like

antiracist teaching, restorative justice was not going to happen overnight; it would require a long-term plan, dedicated to changing the community's beliefs about discipline, power, and people (Evans & Vaanderling, 2022; Maynard & Weinstein, 2020) and as our critical storytelling shows that was just going to take time.

In addition to traditional discipline being a topic for our shared inquiry into restorative justice, there were also examples of critical storytelling in the group that centered on discipline. These stories highlight how traditional discipline is deeply tied to the deficit lens through which some teachers and administrators view their students.

Changing Attitudes About Discipline: Critical Storytelling from Abby and Me

The following stories are about discipline and highlight mindsets that reflect traditional school discipline and a deficit lens. The first story is about a student who used a slur in the classroom to describe another student, and the recipient of the slur was punished instead of the name caller. The second story is about how attitudes toward the issue of chronic lateness in a school can be too focused on students as a problem instead of looking for a solution.

During the study Abby was promoted to vice principal at the high school in the same district where she had been teaching. Due to this change in position, discipline took on a larger role in her daily work at the school. She described the following:

One of the very first things I had to deal with was a child who came and said that someone used the F slur in the class, and the teacher didn't address it. And when she did address it, she came to him and she said, well, he said that he didn't say that to you. So, she basically wrote up that child for being disruptive instead of the child who used the word. (Meeting 1/9/23, p. 11)

She continued, "It gets worse." The teacher wrote an email to the parent to "explain the situation and basically defend herself" and in the email she wrote out the slur two times (Meeting 1/9/23, p. 11). Abby went to the teacher to investigate the issue between the students and discuss the contents of the email the teacher wrote to the parent. Abby explained, as they were talking about the incident "The teacher said, 'he plays the black and gay card.' And I was like, 'Here's the thing, you can't say that.'" The teacher told Abby other teachers have said this before, and Abby replied, "Again, you can't say that it's not acceptable" (Meeting 1/9/23, p. 12). In regard to writing out the slur in the email Abby explained to the teacher, "You don't write out slurs, you would not write out the N word and she was like well that's the way we always handled it. If somebody did something for my records, I would write it down" (Meeting 1/9/23, p. 12). As Abby related the story she reflected,

It was obvious to me that like this, the way that this person thought, I was not going to completely change like her whole way of being. However, I think we got to the understanding that this is not acceptable. You know these are not things that you can do. (Meeting 1/9/23, p. 13)

Later when Abby spoke to the other student, he admitted to her that he did say the slur as the initial student had reported and after she spoke to him about his actions and what he should do to repair harm she went back to the teacher and explained,

You took his word for it, that he didn't do anything, and he did. So now you made this child feel insignificant. And what you're telling me is that this child has had incidents like this before that went unaddressed. And now you just did that again. And you just made him think that like his feelings are invalid. (Meeting 1/9/23, p. 13)

At the request of the parents Abby met with them and the teacher together. She recounted, “And the parents, you know, told her what was wrong with what she did and why she was offended. And you know, let the teacher kind of say her piece and tried to come to an understanding about why this is not okay” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 13).

This story shows a situation that is problematic on many levels. The favoring of one student over another was one aspect that stood out to me. In addition, the deeply held beliefs about discipline and looking at students as a problem were on full display. However, Abby’s critical story also showed that there was some reason for hope. Implementing restorative practices effectively could have positive outcomes for students, parents, and teachers.

This next story was from one of my personal school experiences. In this story, I was in the hallway at school, and I was speaking to a colleague. I had just heard that she along with another teacher were tasked with investigating chronic tardiness at the school. Tardiness was a daily issue at the school and a team of teachers, usually three or four, were assigned to sign students in late each morning. The line of students could be quite long, and both students and teachers had complained that being five minutes late could turn into being 15 minutes late to class by the time students were signed in and received their passes.

I recounted, “I was expressing my appreciation to this colleague for taking up like this tardiness question and like my feeling that there had to be a reason for so much tardiness and if, maybe if we could understand the why, like maybe the school could help students” I told my colleague, “I was at one of my [NJCEA] meetings that I attend, and our presenter said tardiness is a hardship for some students” (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 13). My colleague agreed and explained that they were going to focus on the why and prevention instead of punishment. Then I continued:

as we were, like talking a teacher who was in the hall chimed in with something like, ‘There is no hardship, like lateness is not a hardship it's lazy.’ So, I asked him about the fact that most of our kids don’t drive so they need to rely on other people to get them to school and he said they should wake their parents up earlier. Then he said something about being a coach and I don't really know this guy so I just kind of ended the conversation. I said like ‘agree to disagree’ and walked away. (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 13)

As the critical stories underscore, a shift in attitudes was crucial and necessary in order to implement restorative justice practices in our schools. Calling students “lazy” or saying they played “the black and gay card” are blatant examples of the deficit views that some teachers hold about students. The other impediment was the deeply held views about discipline and punishment that will take time to change and there are no clear cut ways to make these changes happen.

To add to the difficulty in implementing restorative practices Evans and Vaanderling (2021) called for an almost complete overhaul of a community's practices where restorative justice was “integrated within all aspects of education —i.e., curriculum, pedagogy, hallway interactions, lunchroom and bus environments, administrative and policy protocol, staff meetings, family-school engagement, and school-community partnerships” (p. 23) which presented an overwhelming picture of what our schools were up against in thinking about enacting restorative practices. The book that the book club at my school read was *Hacking School Discipline: 9 Ways to Create a Culture of Empathy & Responsibility using Restorative Justice*. Even if the title suggested a quick fix, it was clear from what we read that implementation was a long process.

Through our shared inquiry and critical storytelling, we were able to think about and discuss traditional school discipline. Although we were dealing with different issues in our different contexts, the process of learning about restorative justice led to helping our schools become more restorative. For me, I joined the book club which has now become a panel at our school. This is a panel of teachers who volunteer to function as facilitators in restorative justice meetings with students. In addition, our discussions and critical stories about restorative justice connected to and supported the other meaning making in which we engaged in and questions we tackled in the inquiry circle. Questions like: how can we change the narrative?

The Deficit Lens: How Can We Change the Narrative?

As English teachers we love narratives, to tell them, to hear them, and to use the power of stories to liberate, give voice to people who might not usually have one, or just to enjoy them. Our critical stories and our shared inquiry to explore restorative justice revealed that narratives can also be detrimental and oppressive. We call for a change in the way not just discipline but the students themselves are viewed and the narratives that teachers and whole schools have about students that perpetuate stereotypes. As English teachers working to become antiracist our first step was to examine our practice and acknowledge the deficit lens as a problem. Beyond that acknowledgement we talked about ways to change the narratives teachers hold about students, to reframe conversations about students and discipline or achievement, to focus on aspects teachers can control, and to balance the inequity that can result from deficit views and leave students feeling othered.

We saw deficit views of students perpetuated by teachers and administrators in all of our contexts, some of the stereotypes were very common, for example, the idea that if a student is

not successful in the classroom it is because they do not care, their parents do not care, or they lack motivation. Abby offered,

I hate to think that anybody, that any of the kids here don't care, like you have to figure out, what is getting in the way? What is the barrier that's getting in the way? Like don't, don't assume that kids don't care just because they are not doing well. It's just not fair."

(Meeting 2/27/22, p. 16)

Changing this narrative is crucial to equity in classrooms because, in addition to being unfair, this view takes the onus off of finding solutions for all students to achieve and puts it on the negative idea that students or even their parents do not care which is out of a teacher's control.

Saying students do not care or do not care as much seems innocuous enough but these views are no less derogatory or damaging than the more blatant examples we shared. Abby related the following anecdote, in a meeting with another teacher and a guidance counselor, she said, "They were frustrated about the parent involvement and how parents were not, I don't know, performing miracles, I guess I'm not sure" (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 4) and the other teacher in the room said, "XX doesn't sent us any quality students. XX is an apartment complex in our town" (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 4). This negative view, even if fueled by frustration, did not help anyone. Abby reframed the conversation in a more positive direction, "Let's just go back to the fact that like, we can't control everything, but there are some things that we can control. So, let's not worry about what the parents are doing. Let's worry about what we can do here for the students" (12/5 meeting, p. 5). Abby reframed the deficit view which is one way to change the narrative.

Another common deficit view was lumping kids together based on only one of their identities. I related an anecdote about a colleague who assumed that our school had a large

Indian population because our school has a large Asian population, believing the number to be 60% which is a large percentage. I said, “I always worry, like, when people have these big umbrella terms, you know, like Asian. We’re actually like 46% Asian, so not 60% . . . You know it’s not all Indian either, there are a lot of other groups represented” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 4). Ashni replied, “I guess to some people it's just like, you know 60% 40% What, what difference does it make? It's just a lot of brown people” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 4) then she described her experience in her former school:

I could sense the, the kind of animosity when they said Asians and then there's lots of people from like, Bangladesh. That's not India, you know, they have their own culture and customs etc. But they would be grouped in with the Indian kids. And they would just be like, well, I'm not Indian, you know, and then there was the Pakistani kids and then there's the Iranians and the Persians. And yeah, it'd be all lumped together and it's kind of unfortunate. (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 4)

The words we used to describe these examples were “unfortunate” and “a shame” because students are aware of these harmful views. In Alyssa’s critical story she described the antiracist chain that her students wanted to wrap around the school and how students attempted to challenge stereotypes by using their own voices to change the narrative. They wrote, “Not all Hispanics are Mexican” and “Not all Brazilians play soccer.” When I saw her at the end of the year at the NJCEA showcase, she said they were able to do the chain, but it became an affirmation chain with positive affirmations about diversity. It was not what they originally planned but it was progress.

It was not just individual teachers who harbored deficit views. In Ashni’s critical story, we understood the underlying message of the PD on gangs, that people in the town and school

should be afraid of people who come from urban areas who they assumed will be people of color as “the demographics have been changing” (Meeting 12/5/22, p.7) and she understood the deficit view that the principal and the district were taking toward this new population of students and disseminating fear and negativity to the staff, even before the students arrived. Much like the “Portuguese Flu” comment that Alyssa shared, when her colleague said, “they come” and he was “highlighting it that it was specific to this demographic and this race of kids like it was their fault that the flu was in the school.” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 19). She worried this “mentality is just seeping through the way the teachers react, like correspond with the students” and prompted her to ask the striking question, “If that is what you think of them, then how will you teach them?” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 19).

Instead of viewing students in a certain way or making assumptions based on where they are from and who their parents are, we collectively agreed that asking students how they wanted to be viewed, named, and treated, and giving them a say in what they want to learn are the best ways to avoid a deficit view. Sealy-Ruiz (2021) contended that “Labeling students as at promise instead of at risk avoids the deficit view” (p. 3) which is a good starting point, language is important but there is more that teachers can do. English teachers have a unique opportunity to use literature to change the narrative by representing marginalized voices in positive and celebratory ways. We can challenge detrimental deficit narratives in schools by choosing texts that are representative of our students and by telling and letting students tell their own stories and histories (Navarro, 2020; Neville, 2020). Instead of describing or always showing students of color as victims of the system, Dunn and Love (2020) suggested teachers reframe what can be offered to students in an antiracist classroom, black joy. Holding students to high expectations

lets them know that teachers value their intelligence and listening to their voices and giving them choices shows we value them as people as well.

The deficit single story narrative needs to change, to do that teachers can “refuse secondly” (Adichie, 2009). To refuse secondly is to reject stories that do not start at the beginning (Neville, 2020) as in my critical story about lateness being laziness. Teachers can look at aspects of the problem that they actually have control over and work to solve inequity instead of labeling children. Challenging and changing long held and ingrained beliefs is difficult. We said: “You're getting in their way, challenging their thoughts” (Abby) “thoughts that are ingrained right” (Ashni) “Yeah. Implicit and explicit.” (Lisa) (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 23). Still, as our critical stories show there are ways to change the narrative. Alyssa called for more “culturally responsive teachers” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 18). Abby suggested “you get a bunch of kids in a room, and you ask them to share” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 8) and similarly Ashni recommended creating a safe environment, “I always personally felt that students feel comfortable in English classrooms” (Meeting 9/26/22, p.1) These are antiracist actions we as English teacher were taking. Students deserve respect and to be seen and teachers are in a position to perpetuate or to change deficit narratives. Abby suggested:

So, you know, that's like what bothers me the most, that if these people looked at these kids as, they are someone's children right? This could be my child. I just think they would just treat them differently. I think they would just treat them better. And that really bothers me. It's the way that people look at students, look at children. (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 2)

Antiracist teachers can shift the lens or perspective to where the child is not the problem or a problem to be solved but a human being, somebody's child. A human who does not need to

be pitied but does need empathy and support to move beyond their circumstances and learn in a welcoming, accepting, and antiracist environment.

Through our critical storytelling, our shared inquiry, and our dialogic group we were able to think and learn about a variety of topics. Whether it was when and how to speak up against microaggressions and racist remarks, changing the narrative around discipline, questioning the planning and implementation of professional development, or ways of updating the curriculum and attitudes the group tried to make meaning that could assist us on our journeys to becoming antiracist. One way we made meaning that was unexpected and powerful was from our critical storytelling.

Making Meaning from Critical Storytelling

The Story tellers, gathering attention into their tales, spoke in great rhythms, spoke in great words because the tales were great, and the listeners became great through them.

(Steinbeck, 1939, 2006, p. 325)

We became critical storytellers in our group very naturally. By this I mean we told stories naturally and later I realized we were engaging in critical storytelling. In the circle, we became listeners and receivers of the gift of those stories and with these stories came a deeper understanding of ourselves, a richer understanding of (anti)racism in the contexts of different schools, and a stronger commitment to antiracist social justice work. Freire (1970) said for individuals to come to a full understanding of the world required using “his or her own word, to name the world” (p. 33). The storytellers chose the stories they wanted to tell and choose their own words to tell their stories all the while making sense of the story for themselves as they told it to the listeners. What made the stories stand out and made me research to find a label for our storytelling was the reactions to or actually the lack of reactions to the long personal narratives

we all told. Of course, there was acknowledgement, but no advice given and no jumping to the next story, which in my experience so often happens in groups of teachers. There was a lot of processing because sometimes there is nothing to say. The stories did have an impact, meetings would pass, and stories would often be revisited because the ideas or feelings overlapped with a new topic or would confirm what we had already talked about. One of us would say, “There is that deficit lens again” and bring us back to the story or I connected my yoga experience to Ashni’s two months after Ashni told her critical story because we were talking about cultural appropriation and the quality of PD.

As the stories were told I listened and questioned: What does that story mean for the teller? What does it mean for the listener? Is there an experience related to what happened here that can help us make sense of what we want to accomplish as antiracist English teachers? I invite the readers of this study to ask these questions as well. Later I tried to articulate what was special about this storytelling and I borrowed the idea from Barone (1992) and others because what they described was what I was experiencing. In this chapter I attempted to explain why what we engaged in was critical storytelling and to relate the meaning we made from our critical storytelling through the questions the stories prompted. I cannot offer easy answers or neat takeaways, as our critical stories mostly provided more questions.

Van Galen (2014) used critical storytelling to study teacher candidates. She asserted, “The stories that these students choose to tell are each highly personal, yet several common themes weave through them” (p. 48). This was true of our small group, but more than themes our stories evoked common questions: Why is antiracist work so difficult? How can we continue on our journeys? And how can we get others to join us in the work? Throughout our work together, and in the presentation of it here I, have taken a positive stance. In Abby’s critical story about the

slur when she said, “It gets worse” she did not mean that the story became worse, or the teacher became worse, instead she was explaining that the experience was worse for the child and his family. In our stories negative things did happen, the racism, microaggressions, and inequity were real and had real and damaging effects, but we remained hopeful in our work to take action for change. From a positive and activist stance (de los Ríos et al. 2020, Oyler, 2017; Simon, 2015) putting our stories and experiences alongside one another, and we attempted to come to some conclusions, not definitive answers, about what it meant to be antiracist educators.

Critical storytelling leads to meaning making by giving insights into the structures that cause inequities and helped us examine our lived experiences. These stories were not gossip, they served a purpose, and they identified areas to scrutinize and question further: when and how to speak up against racism and injustice, how to change attitudes and narratives to avoid a deficit lens, how professional development could be more effective, how to update curricula, how to be good co-conspirators, and how to take meaningful action.

Although by definition, critical stories are told for the purpose of understanding inequities and injustices and in hopes that these stories allow for both the teller and the listener to engage in meaning making that can lead to action (Barone, 1992; Flores Carmona & Luschen, 2014), our stories mostly prompted us to ask more questions. We did not necessarily come to answers to the questions we addressed here or the millions of others we thought about during our time together, but we did engage in thinking and inquiry with like-minded collaborators which in and of itself can be considered an action and I do offer some suggestions and implications in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

Becoming antiracist is a continuous journey in which one never reaches a point of being. This study reveals just a snapshot in time showing how members of the inquiry circle came to the work with our histories and identities, our attempts individually and collectively to take action, our engagement in critical storytelling, and our hope for the future. Ahmed (2017) said, “Where there is hope, there is difficulty” (p. 2) and being with each other despite the negative experiences from some of the critical stories we shared made us hopeful. We know that teachers doing antiracist work in schools are making small differences, that is why there is so much pushback. The times are changing, and some would prefer to stick with the status quo (Davis et al., 2022; Love, 2019).

Seemingly obvious, the study revealed that working to become antiracist and taking action are extremely difficult particularly in the current sociopolitical climate and within the structures of schools where teachers are rarely valued as researchers. The amazing women who joined me on this journey, who agreed to meet outside of school, are all full time English teachers, mothers, and have a host of other responsibilities. The group found that just having the time and space, albeit between dinner and bedtime on Monday nights, to discuss issues of race(ism), social justice, and equity with like-minded teachers helped our growth as professionals and people.

Personally, I had to remind myself that I am on a nonlinear journey to becoming antiracist and that this work is ongoing. One of the prompts the teacher inquiry circle discussed was: “How would you describe your role in working toward social and racial justice in your community or communities? Are you more of a helper, advocate, organizer, or rebel? Is this a good role for you? Has this role changed over time?” (Singh, 2019, p. 198). I confided, “I feel like I’m having a hard time with this rebel part. I definitely see myself as a helper and advocate,

and a little bit of an organizer, but this rebel part, I just, I don't know" (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 11). Although the individual experiences of members of the teacher inquiry group were different, to take action a goal I had for the group was to acknowledge those differences and use them to better understand ourselves, our privileges and bias, and the world in which we live. Studying our lived experiences showed that there was more than one way to be antiracist and reminded me of the necessity for deep self-reflection so I can give my best self to the work (Love, 2019). Despite the fact that I have not been much of a rebel, I was determined to continue to work on being a coconspirator and "sit in the uncomfortable, indeterminate process of becoming" (Neville, 2020, p. 379). Through the questions, fatigue, and self-doubt, the group was a place for hope, a place to believe and imagine that change can happen.

It was not only from our group that hope can be derived. There was also hope we saw in our students and the next generation. Abby asserted, "I definitely think the young people are the only people who are going to change anything" (Meeting 1/9/23, p. 17). There was hope in Alyssa's students who wanted to "break down stereotypes," in Abby's "Social Justice warriors" who she described as "rockstars," and in Ashni's and all of our desires as moms to instill messages of equity and the beauty of diversity in our own children. All of these instances give hope. So, if the adults in schools and the world outside of schools cannot accept a more racially just and equitable society, the students who are experiencing the changes in antiracist teacher's attitudes and ways of being are certainly appreciative. I only have evidence from my own students to share but I think the students of my collaborators and all teachers working toward more equitable antiracist classrooms might receive similar feedback. The comments come from students and were compiled for a teacher appreciation email sent to me by our school's Key Club advisor. I wrote in my researcher journal:

From a freshman: You are honestly the first and only teacher who has intentionally set aside time to allow students to get things off our chest. Thank you for valuing our mental and emotional health. From a senior: I feel incredibly lucky to experience what a safe and empowering classroom feels like because it inspires me to pass that on to my own career as a future educator. Another freshman: You are a safe space and everything that you do for us helps us feel not so lost and alone every day. Walking into your class was like a relief. I felt safe and comfortable in your class, a feeling I don't necessarily feel in other classes. Finally, a senior: Your class is full of laughter, understanding, flexibility, enjoyment, and intelligence. (Journal entry 3/13/23, p. 22)

As Picower (2021) explained about effective practices in her own antiracist work, I do not include these sentiments from my students to congratulate myself, I include them to show there is hope for change and that working to become antiracist will have a positive impact on all students regardless of how they identify. Another area for hope was the leadership academy Abby attended. As a new supervisor Abby was required to attend PD for new administrators. After she attended her first meeting with fifty other new administrators, she described her experience as:

Today, it was all about that, all about like, Equity and Diversity and being inclusive and, you know, not just with race, but in special education and like all different areas and it was such a great conversation and it was all people who like, actually believed in it, and I was like, this is like a really great thing because these are all new administrators like new principals, new assistant principals. I thought that it was a little inspiring tonight.

(Meeting 2/6/23, p. 15)

Abby's experience is reflective of the idea we explored of changing attitudes and embracing new ways of thinking, new ways of teaching and now new ways of leading in schools. Our critical stories showed that it is harder for people to change when they have been doing things like teaching a certain way over a long period of time. This academy was made up of new administrators, and I too was inspired to think of them going back to their schools having knowledge and ready to take action for change.

Throughout our time together we used our inquiry and critical stories to make meaning of our contexts and examined how to take actions as antiracist teachers and social justice advocates. We examined times when we spoke up against racism and times, we were silent. We discussed what stopped us and ways to find our voices to more effectively speak out. We explored the deficit narratives of both students of color and teachers of color and the need for these views to be challenged and changed. We asked: how can we change long held beliefs and attitudes? and there were no easy answers. Individually we assessed our classroom practices and agreed that there was a need for not just more representation, although extremely necessary, but also to teach the curriculum in a way that brings race to the forefront and celebrates diversity. We investigated why so much of the action in schools is performative, why DEI professional development was only having a minimal impact on changing attitudes and improving the lives of students.

Throughout our journey(s) we showed that there is more than one way to be antiracist, to do social justice work, and to take action to bring about changes both large and small. Our lives showed that a person's background and history have an impact on their motivations to do the work and how they approach the work. We desperately wanted to know how to get more people to answer the call to action. Hope guided us throughout our journey, it helped us remain positive, to avoid the anger and negativity that can impede action. Ahmed (2017) suggested that "Hope is

not at the expense of the struggle but animates a struggle” (p. 2). Although our small but mighty group no longer meets, we continue to journey on because we must. Regardless of race all people are harmed by racism and in our workplace as teachers and personally we need to work to heal that harm in ourselves, our families, our students, and society at large.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications

Talk about a dream

Try to make it real

You wake up in the night

With a fear so real

You spend your life waiting

For a moment that just don't come

Well, don't waste your time waiting.

Badlands, you gotta live it everyday

Let the broken hearts stand

As the price you've gotta pay

Keep pushin' 'til it's understood

And these badlands start treating us good. (Springsteen, 1978)

When I attended the Bruce Springsteen concert this summer he played *Badlands*, I thought to myself this is the song that people need right now. I find the song a powerful reminder that when people take action, they can enact change. When faced with forces like the patriarchy, systemic racism, neoliberal agendas, among others that prevent equity in schools and harm society, teachers and those who work in and around schools have to “Keep pushin’ ‘til . . . these badlands start treating us good.” Even in the darkest times teachers can have hope that their actions will bring about change.

On the morning of September 11, 2023, I was in a classroom teaching when one of my students asked the question that has become so common on the anniversary of 9/11, “Where

were you?” In response to the question I replied, “In this room.” Coincidentally, this year I had been assigned to room 234 for the first time in many years. I shared the story of that day with my students. On September 11, 2001, during my first year of teaching and only probably the fifth or sixth day of school, the phone began to ring and ring. Parents were picking up their children and people were running by in the hallway. Students were asking me question after question; the most pressing one was what was going on, to which I really had no answers. Although we were miles away from ground zero, we could see the smoke in the distance. I summed it up for my current students who were not yet born that that day was extremely chaotic and very scary. When I think back to that moment, a moment in time, in history, in my life that is hard to forget, I know that I experienced a change. I knew then that teaching was going to require a lot more from me as a person than my teacher education program led me to believe, and I questioned whether or not I was prepared for the journey ahead. Although I was afraid of the uncharted territory I was entering, I was hopeful that despite the bad, there would always be good.

Nineteen years later, as an experienced English teacher, a feminist pedagogue, and a candidate in a doctoral program, I experienced another such moment of change. The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, during a worldwide pandemic, reminded me that a lot is required of me as a teacher and prompted me to question once again. This time I questioned the action I was taking to fight inequity in my classroom and school. I asked myself, was it enough? Experiencing moments of great unrest or uncertainty can motivate people to change as was seen during the summer of 2020. I was motivated to change the way I was teaching by including being antiracist to the feminist pedagogy in which I was already engaged in my English classroom. I was motivated to study my teaching practice as an English teacher as calls for action from all around the country encouraged me to do (Falter et al., 2020; Johnson, 2020). I was

motivated to find out what other English teachers who similarly felt the need to answer the call were doing in their classrooms and contexts.

To these ends, I designed this seven month Feminist Practitioner Action Research (FPAR) study of English teachers as we attempted an antiracist journey of becoming. I recruited a group of English teachers who were self-proclaimed teachers for social justice. We were a small group of strangers from different contexts who were all committed to doing antiracist work in our classrooms and schools. With my three collaborators, we formed a teacher inquiry circle and began a collective journey where we were able to examine our practice, our schools, and ourselves. We were able to tell critical stories about our lived experiences as we attempted to be antiracist and work against inequities. To examine the group's journey to becoming antiracist, I used the following research questions to guide the study and my actions:

1. How can a group of English teachers in an inquiry circle actively work to disrupt the structures, policies, institutions, and systems that act as barriers and preserve race-based inequities in their classrooms?
2. What are the lived experiences of English teachers from a variety of contexts as they attempt to become antiracist teachers in the English classrooms where they teach through a teacher inquiry group?

The answers to these questions proved to be messy and the journey the inquiry group traveled together proved to be quite challenging. Our attempts at meaning making from our experiences and critical stories led us to many more questions to ponder and explore but no simple or clear answers and that was okay.

The group was on a journey with no destination, no end. Therefore, I resisted a pre and post survey demarcating a clear beginning and end and instead attempted to capture the

nonlinear, messy journey of becoming. It is true that the group faced many obstacles and limitations, and although from the outside any progress made might be considered insignificant, what I present here is not a hopeless picture of impossible odds and a lack of change. I present a realistic picture of teachers attempting to take antiracist action. I show that the actions we took, even if personal and small, were valuable and made change possible. I found that a FPAR study such as this one could contribute to scholarship on antiracist teaching, social justice action taking, and collaborative inquiry by teachers from varying contexts.

In this chapter I discuss the summary of my findings which include the necessity for teachers to do intersectional identity work first but then to perpetually reflect and question our practices; the necessity of storytelling to work toward liberation, and the belief that antiracism is an ongoing process that is unique to each individual. Then, I present my conclusions and in particular I discuss the barriers that prevent teachers from doing antiracist work that need to be eliminated; how teachers are doing antiracist work while maintaining hope in the current social political climate; how (English) teachers need to take a transformative activist stance in order to bring about change; how teachers need more support and collaboration; and how collaborative inquiry groups like the teacher inquiry circle can be affirming and beneficial for teachers who want to take antiracist actions. Finally, I discuss the implications of this study for English teachers, for administrators, for teacher education, and for education research. In lieu of a conclusion, I offer my hopeful thoughts for the future as the study is complete, but my journey to becoming antiracist and that of my collaborators continues on without an end.

Summary of Key Findings

Identity Work: A Beginning and Continuous Process

For teachers doing antiracist work, there are no blueprints or roadmaps to follow. The journey is nonlinear and messy, as this study of English teachers on a journey to becoming antiracist revealed. A starting point for teachers wanting to do this work necessitates that teachers grapple with their own identities, ideologies, stories, and histories. Sealey-Ruiz (n.d.) described it as an “archeology of self” where teachers are “digging deep and ‘peeling back layers’ on their life experiences” (para. 1). Although teachers are encouraged to do self-work first (Love, 2019), like all antiracist work, identity work is ongoing and requires continuous reflection and questioning.

Our group did begin by grappling with our identities with the prompts that we answered as the literature suggested those doing antiracist work should do. Each of our childhoods showed how our histories had a major impact on the beliefs that we as teachers enacted in our classrooms today. Our histories underscored just how young teachers are when their ideas about race and identity form and the lasting and far-reaching impact of these ideas. Ashni, an Indian woman, who was raised in a predominantly white area realized that from as long as she could remember her skin color set her apart. She revealed that her thoughts about teaching and living are, “Just lasting impacts of you know, just being different from day one” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 16). Abby and I, both white women, grew up in diverse urban settings. Rather than treating race as a taboo topic, we acknowledged race as a factor from an early age and were brought up to embrace the diversity around us. These beliefs impacted how we approached teaching and learning in our classrooms today. Alyssa, who had the experience of living in two very different places, one diverse and one not, called the change from a diverse neighborhood to one that was not diverse as “a smack in the face” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 11). She too showed how context mattered greatly. Regardless of where a teacher or future teacher may have grown up, they must explore

their histories and experiences and determine how both positive and negative aspects of their upbringing may impact the decisions they make in the classroom (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019; Skerrett, 2011).

After a close examination of their histories and identities, teachers will likely need to adjust their attitudes and ideologies based on what their examination disclosed. As this study revealed, changing attitudes is not a quick fix nor an easy solution whether one is attempting to change one's own attitude or the attitudes of others. Therefore, examination of self is not only a beginning action, but also a continuous process for teachers to engage in as identities are not fixed nor are contexts (Casey & McManimon, 2021; Winn, 2018). Antiracism requires constant examining, reflecting, and questioning of self. Ebarvia (2021) called for English teachers to "persistently ask ourselves how our own racialized, gendered, and other socialized identities affect how we choose texts, deliver instruction, and most importantly, engage with students" (p. 584) showing that self-work does not end. Each new student, new text, and new curriculum require teachers to look within to understand the decisions they make in classrooms on a daily basis.

Identity work for teachers, like the members of the teacher inquiry group, also requires teachers to understand how their identities are viewed by students and colleagues and how these identities fit into the specific contexts where they teach (Rolón-Dow et al., 2021). English teachers in particular who deal with "dilemmas of race, of ethnicity, and other aspects of identity" (Thomas, 2015, p. 172) in their curriculum, need to understand their own identities as they navigate their understanding of the identities of others. Honest identity work strives for teachers to have a clear understanding of their racial identity and how that identity impacts their teaching regardless of the individual context (Skerrett, 2008). In the study of English teachers on

a journey to becoming antiracist I found that identity work is paramount. In fact, Love (2019) cautioned teachers not to attempt the work of antiracism without doing the interior work first. A close examination of one's history and identity is an important beginning step on an antiracist journey, but teachers must continually examine themselves in relation to their students, their teaching, and in their contexts. When (English) teachers decide to become antiracist, they are initiating a continuous journey that requires not only a dedication to antiracism in the classroom but to living an antiracist life.

Critical Storytelling: An Essential Part of Our Antiracist Journey

When I proposed this study, I assumed that a teacher inquiry group would focus on discussion and inquiry protocols. I wrote in my proposal, "Once a routine is established group meetings will consist of some combination of inquiry, discussion, and reflection with time for storytelling (Bisplinghoff, n.d.) and journaling" (Proposal, Spring 2022, p. 76). At the time I thought storytelling would be tangential to the process of becoming antiracist; what I found instead was that storytelling was a natural part of our group routines and crucial to the teacher inquiry group as we journeyed together. The teacher inquiry circle used our stories which I characterized as critical storytelling to form a community and as a means to acknowledge and make sense of our lived experiences and those of our students as we attempted to take antiracist actions.

In critical storytelling, Barone (1992) described storytellers as, "Out to prick the consciences of readers by inviting a reexamination of the values and interests undergirding certain discourses, practices, and institutional arrangements found in today's schools" (p. 143). Critical stories are not passive or neutral. I operationalized the term critical storytelling as stories for the purpose of understanding inequities. Critical storytelling allows for both the teller and the

listener to engage in meaning making that can lead to action. Flores Carmona and Luschen (2014) offered, “Stories remind us that we cannot depend on statistical data to illuminate experience and compel change, but rather, it is also in the crafting of narratives and sharing stories that social transformation happens” (p. 2). The topics of our critical stories were varied, at times sad, or perplexing, or disturbing; they were told with the hope that by sharing stories within the teacher inquiry circle we were making sense of our antiracist journeys and identifying ways of being or not being antiracist to bring about change.

Our critical storytelling empowered members of the teacher inquiry circle to approach the individual and collective work from a place of strength and positivity. Watanabe (2014) showed that storytelling can lead to liberation and healing. She described the stories of the “American Indian students” she studied as survivance stories, “acknowledging Native power despite the effects of colonization” and used these stories to push back on the “social, political, and educational marginalization of Native populations and knowledges” (Watanabe, 2014, p. 153). Stories such as these act as counternarratives to oppressions that students and teachers face in the classroom and should be cultivated and encouraged (Colomer, 2019; Johnson, 2018; Winn, 2013). Stories are innate and therefore humanizing, they help build community, and they can lead to healing.

The power of stories cannot be underestimated, including the ability of stories to be transformative and liberate schools (Barone, 1992; Flores Carmona & Luschen, 2014; Navarro, 2020; Watanabe, 2014). Just as our critical storytelling showed how we attempted to use the strength of our commitment to do antiracist work and sought to challenge oppressive structures in schools for our students and ourselves, critical storytelling can work for other groups as well. Going forward storytelling in its various capacities: stories told by students, stories told by

teachers, stories in collaborative groups, stories as a part of circle processes, should become a natural and an integral part of antiracist social justice actions in schools.

Antiracism: The Ongoing Nonlinear Process of Becoming

It was clear to us as members of the teacher inquiry circle that being an antiracist teacher was an ongoing process, that we would never reach an end destination (Falter et al., 2020; Lensmire et al., 2013; McManimon & Casey, 2018; Neville, 2020; Rolón-Dow et al., 2021; Sinclair, 2018; Tanner, 2019) and that antiracism was a stance to take in all aspects of our lives, both personal and professional (Love, 2019; Picower, 2021). When the inquiry group formed, our goal was to move forward from where we were and embark on an endless journey of becoming. At one point Abby stated, “You can always get better” (Meeting 1/23/23, p. 4) which to us meant that members of the inquiry circle would not always get the work right, we would not always say the right thing but improving our practices was moving forward, which is what we were striving to do.

There were two problems with the goal of the inquiry circle to move forward. First, it was hard to characterize where we entered the journey to know if we had moved forward and second, these journeys were nonlinear and messy. One could argue that measurement is unnecessary. Still, to glean some understanding of our journeys, I relied on Skerrett (2011), in her study of English teachers in secondary classrooms. Skerrett (2011) identified the ways teachers showed their racial literacy as: apprehensive and authorized; incidental and ill-informed; and sustained and strategic. I appreciated that these categories were fluid, and my collaborators and I, like the English teachers in Skerrett’s study, found we would fluctuate between categories.

When I used the ways of being Skerrett (2011) categorized to make sense of the members of the teacher inquiry group, both in terms of our knowledge of and our ability to implement

racial literacy instruction and antiracist practices in English classrooms, I rarely saw us as incidental and ill-informed. We fought against ignorance by educating ourselves (Falter et al., 2020). Yet, there were times that this category applied, for example, when I addressed the N-word in the class I was covering and failed to consider my positionality and that of the young man who said the word. When I came to the group at the beginning of the school year, I was feeling pretty confident in my ability to be antiracist. I was thinking that my positionality as a doctoral student gave me a certain amount of expertise. After all I had read extensively on and around the topic of antiracism, and I initiated this study. What I found was that in several conversations in and out of the group I was actually quite apprehensive and carried a lot of self-doubt. Part of this doubt came from my positionality as a feminist and a white woman who did not want to “overstep” (Meeting 9/26/22, p. 7) and part was the fear of being perceived as being a white woman who overstepped (Love, 2019). Even with preparation and good intentions, doing antiracist work was complicated. Ashni could justify the need she felt to assimilate and admitted that “It sounds terrible to say” (Meeting 10/24/22, p. 16) but how did she reconcile that need with her need to be antiracist and transform the next generation, her children, and her students? Being antiracist left the inquiry group with endless questions and pushed us back and forth on a nonlinear journey, but in our own unique ways we continued to do antiracist social justice work as individuals and as a part of the group.

As Rolón-Dow et al. (2021) suggested, I found less value in finding ways to categorize the members of the group or to focus on our strengths or weaknesses, a more important realization was that there was more than one way to be antiracist. Abby was the self-proclaimed disruptor, Ashni was working on being antiracist from a more personal perspective, Alyssa was the consummate questioner, and I was trying to figure out how to be a “coconspirator” (Love,

2019). These unique ways of being antiracist can be attributed to multiple factors including the context, our positionality, and even our personality. The unique ways of being antiracist emphasized that “The real work is personal, emotional, spiritual, and communal” (Love, 2019, p. 51) and like being a feminist, an antiracist teacher is not performing, they are living an antiracist way of life (Ahmed, 2017).

The ongoing journey of being an antiracist itself is hard to experience and just as hard to encapsulate. The difficult and uncomfortable work of becoming antiracist is complex, but not impossible. Throughout our journey(s) the teacher inquiry group grappled with pushback from administration and colleagues, with figuring out how and when to speak up, with getting others to answer the call, and much more. We found that though antiracist work is extremely complicated and messy, in all of our unique ways we were able to be antiracist English teachers. The shared journey of the teacher inquiry circle highlighted the necessity of building a community and our individual journeys revealed the unique ways we did antiracist work alongside one another but not alone. Whether we were self-proclaimed, disruptors, questioners, or focused on our personal lives, the members of the teacher inquiry circle embarked on a journey to becoming antiracist and have no plans to stop.

Conclusions

Antiracism Is Everyone's Responsibility: Eliminating Barriers to Answering the Call

During the summer of 2020, the call for societal change was loud and clear. Johnson (2020) challenged people “to dismantle systems that stand in our way—be they at your job, in your social network, your neighborhood associations, your family or your home” (para. 10). Meanwhile educators also sent out a plea for change like Falter et al. (2020) who singled out English teachers as a group that could have an impact if they were willing to “1. Listen and

reflect; 2. Read; 3. Interrogate; 4. Act; and 5. Repeat” (p. 2). Borsheim-Black (2015) too argued, “whether and how English teachers navigate the topic of racism in literature study has long-lasting implications for what students do or do not learn about racism” (p. 426) centering English teachers as an important part of antiracist and more equitable education. English Teachers cannot do the work alone. Falter et al. (2020) further identified that “this is work that is needed for *all* teachers and *all* students” (p. 1). It was at that time that I decided to heed the call to action, and I began to wonder who else was answering the call and would those social justice minded people want to join me on my journey. As much as activism was stirred during this time, the call to action has dimmed and antiracist work has proven hard to commit to and seems even harder to sustain.

During our time together, one of the most lingering and difficult to answer questions for the teacher inquiry circle was: how do antiracist social justice educators get others to answer the call? As a group we believed that fighting racism and oppression in schools was the responsibility of all teachers. Abby said, “Equity is not my thing it is all of our things” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 19) and Ashni noted, “It’s like five people that would have done the work, or participated, or believe already” (Meeting 12/5/22, p. 11). Members of the teacher inquiry group found that there were always some teachers that were willing to answer the call but there was a larger group that consisted of people who were reluctant, apathetic, or unwilling to take the journey. In my researcher journal I wrote:

I don’t want to villainize the teachers and just say oh they are racist or biased or bigots, this is too easy to do and unfair. Some of them very well might be but to label them without understanding where they are on their journeys is wrong too. Even when people

are passionate and don't intend to do harm, harm is done. This is why the work is so hard and it is so hard to get people to do it. (7/7/23, p. 36)

The teacher inquiry group grappled with the question of how to get other teachers to commit to antiracist work. I conclude that getting other teachers and colleagues to answer the call depends on the reason each person has for not answering because there are multiple barriers to doing antiracist work.

Obstacles to Antiracist Work: Teachers Need Time and Training

The inquiry group identified that teachers had many reasons and obstacles standing in the way of becoming antiracist. A lack of time was the most frequently cited reason. Early on in the study, I voiced frustration at people who said they wanted to take some action but lacked the time. Once I engaged in the work myself, I saw my frustration as unfair. I reflected in my researcher journal, "I was not understanding just how difficult the work would be and how just talking about it was exhausting" (Journal 8/7/23, p. 66). Although from our positions as English teachers it was hard to enact schoolwide change there were a lot of smaller actions that the teacher inquiry group did attempt to take. Looking at the lived experience of English teachers who want to become antiracist, I saw that teachers will do the work however they can with whatever time and resources they have and that is hopeful.

Some teachers who were open to answering the call could be waylaid by fears. For example, the history teacher in Abby's critical story, who was afraid of being in trouble. There is also a greater fear of doing or saying the wrong thing. This was an area that members of the teacher inquiry group struggled with throughout, knowing when and how to speak up against racism and discrimination. I, like many white people, feel uncomfortable talking about race. Ashni pointed out, "Either they don't want to be called racist. They don't want to be told that

they are misunderstanding a situation or misunderstanding a group of people or all groups of people, I guess” (Meeting 10/24/23, p. 21). Even with time and training on DEI and antiracism, in our time together the antiracist and social justice work we were doing was emotionally taxing and challenging to navigate. Ashni acknowledged, “It takes a lot of work. It’s like daily work, you know” (Meeting 10/10/22, p 3). Due to the demanding nature of the work, it is unsurprising and comprehensible that teachers would be reluctant to answer the call. Without support teachers who are willing to answer the call will continue to face barriers.

When the Obstacles to Antiracist Work Are Schools or Teachers Themselves

In our contexts, members of the teacher inquiry circle encountered teachers who were apathetic to DEI and antiracist practices in schools. This apathy manifested itself in pushback to PD; the feeling that being antiracist was unnecessary or actually racist; or schools lacked participation in DEI initiatives that promote the acknowledgement of diversity. Depending on the context schools may believe the celebration of a holiday is unnecessary or does not apply. When I gave an account of all the activities that the SET at my school planned for Diwali, Ashni shared that in her school they did nothing because she offered, “there is just me” (Meeting 10/24/23, p. 3). I wrote in my researcher journal:

It is easy for people who have not experienced oppression to not feel motivated that it doesn't affect them. But it affects everyone. I laughed at [Ashni]’s no Diwali celebration or even acknowledgement. She called her school a bubble and this is a good example of a bubble. These kids live in New Jersey will they never interact with an Indian person in their job or other area of their life. Just because a school is predominately white that is not how the world is. (Journal, 7/21/23, p. 56)

At a time of changing demographics in schools, when schools are not meeting the needs of all of their students (Dumas, 2016; Holme et al., 2013; Lee, 2005; Vellanki & Pavitha Prince, 2018) a lack of concern for DEI and antiracist practices seems unrealistic and counterproductive. Both Ashni, with her critical story about the gang PD, and Alyssa, with the story about the “Portuguese flu” discussed experiencing changing racial and ethnic student populations at their individual contexts, and in both cases the students were viewed as problems for the schools to solve. Deficit responses to changing demographics underscore the need for antiracism in schools, even when or precisely because teachers believe it is unnecessary.

The teacher inquiry group also encountered teachers who did not want to acknowledge race(ism) and felt that DEI training was not necessary at all. One reason for this pushback from teachers was their insistence on colorblindness. While educational scholarship and antiracist literature condemn colorblindness as problematic and challenge colorblindness as part of the status quo (Jupp et al., 2016, Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Picower, 2021; Utt & Tochluk, 2016; Wetzel, 2020), the supreme court ruled against affirmative action (Bomboy, 2023) and bills were passed suppressing DEI initiatives (Bryant & Appleby, 2023) these messages reified the decentering of race. As the literature on antiracism suggested, many times in our own conversations and storytelling, colorblindness was discussed as a problematic way to see the world. Olufadejui et al. (2021), in their study of using race as a first identifier in medical patients, found that race as a first identifier could lead to stereotypes and bias. On the other hand, without acknowledging race the person who is being treated or in the case of schools the person who is being educated may not be seen in a full, clear accurate light. Simply put, to be antiracist, one cannot be colorblind. Less simple as the teacher inquiry group showed is changing teachers’ long held beliefs and damaging school narratives.

Eliminating Obstacles: There Is Still Hope

This study of English teachers attempting to take antiracist actions showed a variety of reasons why teachers are motivated to engage in social justice work. I was motivated by the events of the summer of 2020 while Ashni and Alyssa were motivated by their personal experiences with racism and microaggressions. Counter to motivations such as ours, there were a multitude of reasons why teachers were not answering the call, be it apathy, fear, a lack of belief, or not having the needed support. Although daunting when I look back at the study, I have not lost hope.

First and foremost, if this small group was doing the work, we could not be the only ones. In addition, to lose hope would present another obstacle. Without the possibility that even small actions can bring about change, the lack of power to make larger changes would become another excuse not to try. In fact, if there were no hope teachers would give up teaching altogether. It would be an end for them. Dyches (2018) acknowledged, “Thankfully, teachers have always been, and continue to be, powerful agents of change” (p. 36). Teachers in the inquiry group were able to interrogate their curriculum and make changes and decisions to make it more equitable and create opportunities for students to discuss race(ism) in productive ways. Even outside of our individual classrooms teachers in the group were leaders in DEI initiatives and advisors of student social justice groups. These were a few of the concrete actions we were able to take, and I would argue that some impact is better than no impact.

Like antiracist work itself, answering the call is complicated, there is not one reason why educators are not doing the work therefore there is no one right way to change minds or build solidarity. One important conclusion to getting others to commit to antiracist work is to begin with like-minded people. Abby said, “I feel like you need to network, and you need to talk to

other people. You need to talk to like-minded people” (Meeting 2/27/23, p. 28). Next, like-minded teachers need to have supportive administrators who value the work (Lopez et al., 2009). Based on Abby’s experiences working as a new administrator, for example being able to hire a social justice oriented teacher and Ashni describing her supervisor as supportive in her endeavor to make the literary magazine at their school more inclusive, there are administrators out there who are supportive. On a larger scale the Principal’s Academy Abby attended gave us hope. Abby said, “It was all people who actually believed in it, and I was like, this is like a really great thing because these are all new administrators like new principals, new assistant principals. I thought that it was a little inspiring tonight. (Meeting 2/6/23, p. 15). Schools and their policies can help to eliminate the reasons teachers have for not becoming antiracist social justice educators. By eliminating the discomfort, lack of time, and lack of understanding that act as obstacles and bar teachers from taking action more (English) teachers will answer the call and work against inequity to change the lives of students in school.

Teaching in a Contentious Climate: Ways to Maintain Hope

Another obstacle teachers face in doing antiracist work is today's contentious sociopolitical climate. At this moment in history, doing antiracist work is extremely difficult and even dangerous. With politicians, parents, and political parties putting education front and center in the 2024 presidential election, there is a greater scrutiny on what can be taught in classrooms, how topics like slavery and sex education are taught, and the role of parents in shaping curriculum (Butler, 2021; Hatfield, 2023). As a result, books are being banned at a rate never seen before (Bellamy-Walker, 2022), and educators have lost their jobs or left their jobs due to censorship (Sonnenberg, 2023). With all of the negativity surrounding education and society

today, maintaining hope for change and deciding how to enter and continue to do antiracist work is a major consideration.

Although, I, like many others, considered 2020 a watershed moment, the murder of George Floyd and the pandemic making it “A year to remember. And it was a year that many wish they could forget” (Skerrett & Smagorinsky, 2023, p. 1), the fact remains that society has not arrived at this moment in history suddenly or due to the actions or words of one man (Love, 2019; Picower, 2021). In 2019, de los Rios et al. (2019) described: “Fervent white nationalism, religious and linguistic intolerance, and anti-immigrant and racist discourses characterize our current socio-political landscape” (p. 364) and abolitionist teaching has a long history in this country to match the long history of intolerance and educational inequity. (Davis et al, 2022; Givens, 2021; Love, 2019). The history of antiracism and social justice in this country provides hope. As the struggle for equity continues, looking back ensures the possibility that change is attainable.

Even though in today's climate there are real life consequences for teachers who push against the status quo, none of these concerns diminish the harm racism is doing in schools and the urgent need for antiracist work to combat that harm. (Baker-Bell, 2020; de los Rios et al., 2019; Love, 2019; Sinclair, 2018; Wetzel, 2020). From the study of an inquiry group of English teachers attempting to be antiracist, I conclude that by taking an activist stance and thorough engagement in collaborative inquiry teachers can work together in solidarity to maintain their hope and succeed in bringing about change.

Answering the Call: (English) Teachers Taking an Activist Stance

Today teachers are tasked with teaching in contentious times. For any real change to happen, English teachers must become activists (de los Rios et al., 2020; Johnson, 2018; Kinloch

& Dixon, 2017; Simon, 2015). An activist stance requires teachers to advocate for students and themselves and engage in resistance work by defending students' rights to a quality education (Oyler, 2017). When Alyssa went to the superintendent to start her social justice club and would not take no for an answer that was an activist stance. For inspiration, teachers attempting to be antiracist can look to the long history of Black activists who fought for equitable education for all (Baldwin, 1963; Dubois, 1903; hooks, 1994; Morrison, 1992). For white teachers particularly, activism cannot be performative just as Love (2019) warned about white allyship there must be action.

Picower (2021) suggested, to be activists, teachers must “take risks that put themselves on the line for BIPOC and for racial justice” (p. 17) and Tejada et al. (2003) challenged:

The ideology that pervades liberal notions of social justice is that of a hopeful Americanism. For all its talk against the social ills of ‘racism and economic inequalities,’ it fails to translate into a lived praxis that adequately contests the multiplicity of ways racism, capitalism, homophobia, privilege, and sexism are made manifest. We assert that these social ills cannot be combated simply by pressing the popgun of liberal, middle-class love against the bosom of oppressive social structures. (p. 33)

While teacher activists need to maintain hope in the possibility for change, they cannot be deluded into thinking that their teaching can ever be neutral (hooks, 1994). To avoid “hopeful Americanism,” today’s activist teachers should take actions, such as advocating for restorative practices in school as Abby was attempting to do. An activist stance can begin by teachers trying to understand their identities within the greater context of schools and society. Casey and McManimon (2021) asked white teachers to examine their teaching, “in a time and in spaces

(including our schools) where the values of neoliberal capitalism are often paramount (even if hidden)?" (p. 34) and this is a question that can apply to all teachers.

English teachers can use the tools of the English classroom with our peers as well as our students to be activists. English teachers can make more culturally relevant curricular choices. In contexts where teachers cannot change the curriculum, they can teach the outdated curriculum in different more innovative ways (Skerrett & Smagorinsky, 2023). Dyches (2019) offered, "Teachers wield the dispositions, knowledges, and skills needed to disrupt oppressive teaching practices, the least of which includes their ability to modify resistant-to-change curricula to meet the needs of the vibrantly diverse students" (p. 36). In addition to the traditional topics of English classrooms, teacher activists can incorporate critical inquiry and social action into their curriculum and by doing so encourage students to be activists as well (Skerrett & Smagorinsky, 2023). Like my students in the Building Empathy: Telling Stories project I started last year, who will come up with a civic engagement project this year to go along with the community building they are already doing.

To do antiracist social justice work in these times takes brave risk-takers (Arao & Clemmens, 2013). Not all teachers are in the position to take risks, I reflected in my journal, "Teachers may be afraid to challenge the proscribed curriculum for a variety of reasons and some of these reasons are valid. If teachers are nontenured and are not rehired then there is no chance for them to become activists" (Journal 7/7/23, p. 36). As this study of English teachers showed, there is no one way to be antiracist. English teachers need to find a way to be antiracist that both works for them in their context but pushes them to take whatever action is possible. A way to help teachers develop a more activist orientation is for them to join with other teacher

activists (Oyler, 2017; Navarro, 2020; Simon, 2015; Simon & Campano, 2013) and benefit from doing the work together.

Circle Processes Lead to Collaboration, Solidarity, and Community

Collaboration, solidarity, and community were ideas that permeated my research into how English teachers can become antiracist educators (Simon, 2015; Singh, 2019; Picower, 2021; Winn, 2013). Picower (2021) asserted, “Collaboration isn’t cheating in this work—it’s a powerful and necessary tool of resistance” (p. 80). The challenging work of antiracism and social justice is simply not as effective if done alone (Davis, 2022; Simon, 2015; Winn, 2013). The research on the positive outcome of collaborative groups was plentiful (Bound & Stack, 2012; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Oyler, 2017; Picower, 2021; Simon, 2015; Winn, 2013). The teacher inquiry circle revealed that one way to mitigate risk, emotional and professional, is to find like-minded people and form a community.

Even though personal identity work is key to antiracist work, and identity work is both a beginning and a continuous process, forming groups with like-minded people can enhance the work individual teachers are doing in individual classrooms and improve the likelihood of taking action that achieves some change. A valuable way to form a community is by means of circle processes. Pranis (2005) described the value circle processes have in a variety of contexts including schools. She said, “In schools they help create a positive classroom climate and resolve behavior problems. In the workplace, they help address conflict, and in social services they develop more organic support systems for people struggling to get their lives together” (p. 4). Circle processes promote collaboration, community building, and inquiry (Pranis, 2005; Winn, 2013) and are an apt vehicle for doing antiracist and other social justice work. In the circle hierarchies are eliminated and a group's shared humanity is used to foster connections (Pranis,

2005). Antiracist work is difficult, and it takes a toll on those brave enough to commit themselves to becoming antiracist. Therefore, having a community that honors one's humanity is crucial for educators doing antiracist work.

While having a community for teacher inquiry and a routine like an inquiry circle can help maintain the wellbeing of antiracist educators of all identities, the purpose of these groups is not therapy. Navarro (2020) found in his study of a teacher collaborative inquiry group that the group “served as an alternative learning space that allowed for teachers to engage in theory, discussion, and reflection to sustain and reclaim their humanity” (p. 172). Thereby, the vulnerability of the group not only provided healing for its members, it allowed them to work more effectively toward their goals. Circle processes are also storytelling processes, where “Every story has a lesson to offer” and “People touch one another's lives by sharing stories that have meaning to them” (Pranis, 2005, p. 4). Storytelling adds another component to collaborative inquiry as storytelling helps strengthen community between teachers and amplify their understanding of themselves and each other.

Pranis (2005) advised, “Identify possible participants, making sure to include people of different perspectives. The potential benefit of a circle is dramatically reduced if all participants already view the topic the same way” (p. 24). When I was forming the teacher inquiry circle, I was aware that I wanted participants from various identities and perspectives. That is not to say that members of the circle did not share important characteristics. First, we were all English teachers, we were all self-proclaimed teachers for social justice, and we were all committed to a common goal, becoming antiracists. These commonalities afforded us with a shared subject matter and tools to leverage, like our knowledge of effective discussion techniques, that enhanced our discussions and storytelling about taking antiracist action in our contexts. The

teacher inquiry circle showed that groups can be formed of like-minded educators and these groups can work toward change.

To maintain hope for change in these troubling times, groups of teachers can use inquiry-based practices to form activist communities. In the teacher inquiry circle our shared goal for more equitable classrooms and schools and opportunities to heal ourselves and society from the negative effects of racism is what allowed us to form a productive, hopeful community. A shared goal of antiracist social justice work will allow for other groups of like-minded teachers from a variety of backgrounds to work together in solidarity against the race based systems that prevent equity in schools and society.

Implications

Racism is pervasive in schools therefore antiracist action cannot be a superficial or one time effort (Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Lynch, 2018; Picower, 2021; Skerrett, 2008; Wetzel, 2020). Racism needs to be met with antiracist actions, but antiracism is difficult and requires a lot from teachers who want to take action in their classrooms and schools. The work is time consuming, emotional, fraught with complexities, and ongoing. Skerrett and Smagorinsky (2023) warned:

Having a ‘conversation about race’ is a common, if often toothless and ineffectual, solution to addressing inequities. Unless that conversation becomes a hard inquiry into a school’s humanity and fundamental design, we’ll be back in the same place when the current fuss dies down” (p. 5).

For teachers to do antiracist work in today’s contentious climate, administrators, teacher education, ongoing professional development, and education scholarship all need to focus on ways to support teachers who are attempting to do this work and survive. Each of these areas can contribute to antiracist teaching by providing the support that English teachers need to resist the

status quo and promote more equitable schools that improve the life chances of students right now.

Implications for English Teachers: The Curriculum and How It Is Taught

This study began as a query into my own teaching practices in my English classroom. As evidenced by the teacher inquiry circle, English classrooms are places of oppression but also liberation and curriculum, and a common place to practice inclusivity and to initiate change. An implication for English teachers is that their pedagogy, how they teach, is equally important as the contents of the curriculum.

Hammerness et al. (2005) offered, “Teachers bring their own assumptions and beliefs (and even prejudices and biases) to bear upon the materials they use in the classroom, the way they interact with materials or describe them to children can create a lens with which the children themselves view the materials” (p. 384). Across the varying contexts of the teacher inquiry group, there was a substantial difference in the content of the curriculum and who was at liberty to choose the literature that was represented in the curriculum. Regardless, teachers cannot let being forced to teach from the literary canon prevent them from teaching in culturally responsive and student-centered ways (Ohito, 2016; Thomas, 2015; Wells & Cordova-Cobo, 2021). Falter and Schoonover (2018) suggested, “In today’s classrooms, canonical texts can still be taught, but teachers need to do so through critical and humanizing pedagogies” (p. 55). Therefore, choosing texts, the availability of diverse texts, and the pedagogical moves used to teach texts are all relevant to antiracist English teaching.

Simms (1990) provided English teachers with a powerful metaphor of windows and mirrors and doors to identify the ways students experience literature. In the blog post, *Reading While Black*, Zoboi (2015) confirmed, “I’ve been trained to do this all my life as a student,

though, without having a Renee Watson or Jackie Woodson to balance out the Shakespeare, William Golding, Stephen Crane, and Nathaniel Hawthorne” (para. 7). Today Zoboï’s own children have the benefit of reading more widely and experiencing books by both white authors and authors of color. But just changing, adding, or even pairing text is not enough (Sinclair, 2018). Dyches (2019) offered, “The windows and mirrors paradigm offers a binary of sorts: either a student does or does not see herself in a particular text” (p. 36). Dyches (2019) challenged English teachers to shatter the windows and doors and teach canonical literature in culturally responsive ways that allow students to read critically, recognize systems of power, and identify social issues that impact their lives. Skerrett and Smagorinsky (2023) also suggested using all text, canonical or not, to explicitly teach empathy, critical inquiry, social activism, and racial literacy. Strategies such as these take the focus away from the text that is being taught and bring the student to the forefront.

In an antiracist classroom, students and their identities, especially racial identities are centered. Even when representation is lacking, teachers can focus on how aspects of their own and their students’ identities contribute to the way they read texts and the world (del los Rios, 2019; Ebarvia, 2021; Freire, 1985). Bringing students’ ways of learning and their lives into the classroom is crucial. In my researcher journal I pondered, “How do we get people to want to make connections with their students? This is multilayered, what are their beliefs about the purpose of teaching, and what their job is in the classroom. How comfortable they are being open themselves because being open is a two way street” (Journal 7/28/23, p. 62). A way for teachers to nurture a connection with students is through the sharing of stories and the use of circle processes in the classroom. Pranis (2005) offered, “Storytelling strengthens a sense of connectedness, fosters self-reflection, and empowers participants” (Pranis, 2005, p. 40). Teachers

can teach the canon in new ways, or explicitly teach empathy, critical inquiry, social activism, and racial literacy (Skerrett & Smagorinsky, 2023). English teachers can and should connect with their students through humanizing pedagogies like storytelling and use text from the curriculum to expose students to liberating ideas like social justice and critical inquiry that have meaning for students and can impact their lives.

Implications for (English) Teachers: The Value of Communities of Inquiry

Looking back at the conversations, the inquiries, and the critical stories of the teacher inquiry circle it is hard to believe that initially we were a group of strangers who came together to form a community. I would like to take credit for the swift transition from strangers to a community of inquiry, but it happened organically and quite quickly. Viewing this group in hindsight revealed implications for other teachers doing antiracist work who, like me, did not want to do the work alone. The benefits of collaboration and community have been clearly established (Picower, 2021; Simon, 2015; Singh, 2019; Winn, 2013) but what this group revealed is that there is value in small groups of teachers from a variety of contexts forming communities of inquiry.

Criticism of the teacher inquiry group might be that it was a small group with little power to enact change. Although our group was small, just 3 or 4 people, the size can be considered one of its positive characteristics. One benefit of the group was that it provided a safe space, in my journal I wrote about the “ways we were safe to speak in the group. First, we were on our own time in a neutral place so there was no worry about job security or punishment for the discussions we were having which might not have been the case had the study been done in one of our schools” (7/9/23, p. 38). In the safe space, having a small group gave each member the opportunity to be more open and more time to think and share. The inquiry group would not

have been able to share so many long critical stories if the group had been large. The small size made the group more intimate and less uncomfortable as it allowed us to be vulnerable with one another. Members of the inquiry group also acted as a sounding board for one another. Speaking up against racism and discrimination was something all the members of the teacher inquiry group grappled with to varying degrees. Speaking up is uncomfortable and can be emotionally draining. Members of the teacher inquiry circle benefited from being able to practice speaking up and gained confidence with the freedom to examine the reasons why they spoke up or did not and determine how they might react in a comparable situation in the future.

One way to combat the lack of power of a small group can be to connect to other groups and approach antiracism on a larger scale. Simon (2015) suggested, “Critical inquiry communities can provide a basis for developing coalitions among school-, university-, and community-based partners, who work together to find local solutions to address seemingly intractable educational problems” (p. 44). Regardless of the size of our group, it was hard to bring about school-wide change in our positions as English teachers. We lacked the authority in many situations to make changes, for example, Alyssa’s desire to hire teachers of color. Building coalitions is at the heart of activism (Davis, 2022) and partnering with other entities can enhance a group’s ability to take antiracist action. Simon and Campano (2013) described teacher activists and their research as “frequently connected to nested communities of practice, within and across classrooms, schools, neighborhoods, or universities” (p. 26). Highlighting that communities of inquiry can span across communities and do not have to be affinity groups.

The Value of Diverse Communities: Talking Across Communities

There has been a school of thought that doing antiracist work in affinity groups, particularly white affinity groups, is beneficial for both white teachers and teachers of color

(DiAngelo & Burtaine, 2022). Michael and Conger (2009) praised their white affinity group at the University of Pennsylvania, they said, “At each of our meetings, it is inspiring and sustaining to see the number of white people at Penn who choose to engage honestly and painfully in the work of self-reflection in order to be better white allies” (p. 60). The results Michael and Conger (2009) presented were hopeful and promising. After all a major sticking point for the teacher inquiry circle was getting teachers to join us. However, the teacher inquiry group, albeit small in size, provided promising results as well. The community that was built among the members of the teacher inquiry circle showed that groups that discuss race across communities can be just as beneficial as white affinity groups and possibly even more beneficial.

Simon (2015) described the positive results of his critical inquiry group, he called the Ethno group. Simon (2015) identified, “Critical solidarity and reciprocal inquiry allowed individuals in the Ethno Group to collectively interrogate and explore alternative worldviews and address issues across differences as well as sites of connection” (p. 57). Inquiry groups across communities can be valuable but there are tensions to navigate. It is quite obvious that the antiracist work that white people need to do is in ways different from the work people of color are doing (Love, 2019; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Skerrett, 2011). White teachers benefit from power and privilege in schools, while teachers of color, like the collaborators in my study, can experience racism, microaggressions, and silencing. While these facts are indisputable, they do not preclude teachers of color and white teachers from forming antiracist social justice groups. Kinloch and Dixon (2017) found that “black and white educators alike” needed to develop “critical consciousness and anti-racist teaching practices” (p. 331). Although Michael and Conger (2018) described cross community grouping as, “Bringing white people and people of color together to discuss race can be like placing pre-algebra students in a calculus class” (p. 57),

this statement does not account for individual teachers' identities, histories, experiences, or grasp of racial literacy. Looking at all white teachers in one way and all teachers of color in a separate way creates a binary and may contribute to stereotypes of both white teachers and teachers of color which are unfair and oftentimes untrue. The teacher inquiry circle in this study showed how a community can be formed from a group of strangers. All members of the group, regardless of race and positionality, brought their own unique talents, personality, and goals to antiracist work and that we were doing the work in decidedly different contexts.

It is not my intention to deny the impact or the value of white affinity groups. Due to the overwhelming whiteness of the teaching profession (Baker-Bell et al., 2017), in some contexts a white affinity group will be the only option and white people even with the best of intentions have caused harm and reified oppression in their attempts at antiracist and social justice work (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019; DiAngelo, 2022; Love, 2019; Picower, 2021; Sarigianides & Banack, 2021). White people should not look to people of color as their sole source of learning to be antiracist (Johnson, 2020) nor should they burden people of color with behaviors such as: white women's tears, displaying feelings of guilt and shame, or attempts to dominate the conversations (DiAngelo & Burtaine, 2022). These responses from white people are well documented (Berchini, 2019; DiAngelo & Burtaine, 2022; Love, 2019; Picower, 2021). What I suggest is an approach to antiracist work through a more intersectional lens, where other considerations beyond race and identity impact the building of communities of inquiry and collaboration. Based on this study the most crucial factors for our community were that we were like-minded, social justice oriented, and committed to antiracist work regardless of our racial identities.

Implications for Administrators: Ways to Support Teachers

Administrators who support antiracist teaching do exist. Abby and the Principal's Academy she attended showed that there are administrators who believe in the importance of antiracist work in schools. However, the teacher inquiry circle showed that this is not always the case. While there could be a variety of reasons why administrators may or may not give teachers the support teachers need and deserve, one thing is certain, there is no way (English) teachers in the current climate, with the emotional toll and time and effort required, can be antiracist without the support of administrators.

There are several ways in which administrators can support teachers who want to be antiracist. They can supply the time necessary to do identity work and to collaborate. They can supply the professional and emotional support (Rolón-Dow et al., 2021; Stevenson, 2018) so teachers can do the work without burnout. Administrators can offer the training necessary for teachers to feel confident in their efforts to do antiracist work as well as engage in antiracist training themselves. Kempkey et al. (2023) posited:

The traditional concept of leadership doesn't apply to antiracism work. This is not to say that those in official leadership positions can sit on the sidelines; it is crucial that leaders communicate the importance of the work and model the vulnerability and courage that it takes to push the system forward. (p. 59)

Administrators who are trained can provide valuable support for and collaboration with teachers who want to do antiracist work.

Another important way to support teachers is by giving them a seat at the decision-making table. Teachers are interacting with students, and in a prime position to contribute to decisions about how antiracist and social justice work is done in schools (Falter et al., 2020). As

districts or individual schools attempt to take antiracist actions, teachers can feel powerless. When the teacher inquiry group discussed attempting actions on a school level, Ashni stated, “I don’t really have that power” (Meeting 10/10/22, p. 8). In a study of teachers who pursued doctoral degrees, Kowalczyk-Walędziak et al. (2017) found that participants perceived their degrees as having a positive impact on their individual classroom practice but a more minor impact on school policy or change. Even with their educational background and expertise, teachers are often not invited to the table when decisions that impact them are being made (Picower, 2015). Conversely, administrators are free to make recommendations all the time about topics including equity and antiracism of which they have varying degrees of knowledge and expertise. Merely giving teachers a seat at the table will not necessarily bring about change. First, teachers have to perceive themselves and administrators have to perceive teachers as experts and allow them to make decisions for their students and themselves.

A major roadblock for teachers doing antiracist work in schools is the lack of time. I wrote in my journal, “Instead of wondering why people do not make time. How about why the system does not allow for time to have discussions” (4/4/23, p. 26). Antiracism should not be an add on or one time discussion. Administrators need to advocate for teachers to have the time to do DEI and antiracist work as an ongoing part of their responsibilities at school. Antiracism is hard work and as such teachers need the time and space to make sense of their thoughts, experiences, and the impact on their teaching. Not having the time and space can lead to burnout. Stevenson (2018) acknowledged that monitoring a teachers’ social emotional wellbeing was important while doing antiracist work. However, to avoid burnout becoming a deterrent to antiracist work administrators can ensure the wellbeing of teachers not by forcing mandatory

activities like Ashni's yoga PD but by supporting teachers in the work and listening when teachers express their needs.

Teachers should also be encouraged to share their stories. Sharing stories builds community and will help teachers reflect and heal (Navarro, 2020). Barone (1992) urged:

It is, therefore, to the crafting of worthwhile stories that I, now as a teacher educator and especially as a qualitative researcher, devote a significant portion of my professional energies. Unlike most public school people, I possess the time and resources needed to gather the threads for weaving my tales. I envision a day when this privilege will be extended to empowered school people. (p. 142)

Telling stories should not be a privilege. Teachers in schools should be able to experience the liberating impact of telling their stories and then share the experience with their students as well. Students should also be able to share their stories with teachers and administrators.

Kempkey et al. (2023), in their study of how administrators can lead a district to antiracism, found, "As we slow ourselves down to listen to the stories of our students, we shift our focal point and, gradually, our ways of being" (p. 63) showing how student stories impacted school leaders. Kempkey et al. (2023) further suggested, "Through truth-telling and listening to those who've been silenced (and then taking action), we can create the schools we long for" (p. 63). Thereby, substantiating that all stakeholders in schools: students, teachers, administrators, and the community can work together in solidarity to create antiracist schools that benefit everyone.

Implications for Administrators: As Purveyors of Professional Development

The teacher inquiry group found that not all professional development (PD) is equally valuable, and some DEI initiatives become performative, or worse inflict harm instead of

healing. Navarro (2020) wrote, “Unfortunately, professional development in the current neoliberal era of education is anti-dialogical, rote, and void of transformative lessons for social justice educators” (p. 172). To support teachers doing antiracist work, administrators can provide teachers the time and space to do collaborative inquiry work that focuses on teacher learning and growth, teacher PD should focus on equity, be culturally responsive, and have an understanding of teachers as learners because “If we want to create more equitable classrooms for kids, that equity should be reflected in the learning opportunities for teachers” (Riordan et al., 2019, p. 13).

Teachers are often encouraged to participate in traditional PLCs, but these groups focus on accountability instead of the lived experiences of teachers and students (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) called for a shift to “new kinds of social relationships that assuage the isolation of teaching and other sites of practice. This is especially true in inquiry communities structured to foster deep intellectual discourse about critical issues and thus to become spaces where the uncertainties and questions intrinsic to practice can be seen” (p. 37). Allowing teachers to form inquiry groups like the teacher inquiry circle takes the onus from top down deductive learning and puts teacher learning into teachers’ hands (Picower, 2015). In a teacher inquiry group, teachers can be more focused on their own goals to improve their practice or to become antiracist social justice educators. Riordan et al. (2019) wrote, “Professional development for teaching for equity and critical pedagogy authentically addresses teachers’ needs to drive their learning, consider the specific context, develop understanding of sociopolitical injustices, and promote collaboration” (p. 4). Navarro (2020) called for humanizing all aspects of education including PD. Being a part of a teacher inquiry group is humanizing PD as it focuses on the lives of teachers. Administrators who want to support antiracist teachers need to give them the time and space to discuss issues of race(ism), share their

experiences, and tell critical stories and administrators need to make time for teachers to engage in collaborative teacher inquiry as these are worthwhile endeavors for teachers.

In addition, administrators who are tasked with planning and implementing staff PD can begin by thinking of their own assumptions and bias. To do this, administrators attempting to be antiracist, like teachers, can begin with an examination of self (Sealey-Ruiz, n.d.). Gooden (2021) suggested that every principal should write a racial autobiography, he said, “Good leaders understand the importance of reckoning with racial injustice, so they seek to become more racially aware to unearth hidden assumptions and biases” (para. 7). In this way, administrators who better understand themselves can better support teachers and provide more meaningful professional development.

Implications For Teacher Educators: Preparing Teachers for Diverse Classrooms

In their study of multicultural teacher education, Vellanki and Pavitha Prince (2018) discussed a live comedy recording by comedian Hari Kondabolu called *Waiting for 2042*. The significance of 2042 is that it is when white people are projected to be the statistical minority in the US. The authors offered, “However, Hari Kondabolu reminds us that 49% can be considered the minority only if we assume that the other 51% is exactly the same” (p. 315). For a long time, scholars have been asking the question of how to prepare future teachers who are majority white and female to enter classrooms that boast a wide range of racial identities at the intersections of ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. (Picower, 2021; Skerrett, 2008; Sleeter, 2001; Villegas et al., 2012; Wetzel, 2020). As Vellanki and Pavitha Prince (2018) asserted, “As teacher educators, we are not waiting for 2042. We are preparing for 2042” (p. 315). They underscored the need for teacher education to change because preservice and practicing teachers and their students can wait no longer.

To prepare teachers for the current and continually changing classrooms in which they will be teaching, antiracism must be an integral part of the curriculum before teachers enter the classroom (Johnson, 2018; Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Neville, 2020; Ohito, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021; Skerrett, 2008; Young, 2020). When Skerrett (2008) discussed the “biological influences” (p. 1817) that influence teachers’ experience, effectiveness, and desire to implement antiracist English teaching practices, she included their teacher preparation program as a factor. Teacher education programs have the ability to give preservice teachers the opportunity to begin the identity work that is so crucial to becoming antiracist before they become practicing teachers (Darling-Hammond & Oakes, 2019, Skerrett, 2008; Young, 2020).

Ways to prepare teachers to be antiracist can include focusing on teachers’ racial literacy by equipping preservice and novice teachers with the vocabulary and the confidence to speak up against racist remarks and injustice (Neville, 2020, 2020a; Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). As the study showed, knowing when and how to speak up is beneficial for teachers in their day-to-day interactions with students. In addition, teacher education programs can “position teaching as an activist profession” (Oyler, 2017, p. 31). Teacher activists can act as leaders and collaborators as Davis et al. (2022) argued there is a need for activists and for activists to lean into the power of collaborations and coalitions. Antiracism is the responsibility of everyone who works in and around schools; partnerships and coalitions can be formed with teachers, schools, districts, and communities. Simon (2015) studied a teacher critical inquiry group from their teacher education program and through the first few years of teaching and found, that not only were participants able to adopt “more activist responses to curricula and policies that entered their classrooms” (p. 43) but the well-being of the teachers also benefited from working in the group. Teacher education programs should prepare teachers to work collaboratively with other teachers as well

as families and communities to take an activist stance. Sending novice teachers into classrooms without first examining their identities, working on their racial literacy, or preparing them for diverse classrooms, places unnecessary stress on the teachers and in turn causes harm to the students that they teach. Teacher education can never fully prepare teachers for every eventuality or every circumstance. However, teacher education programs can be more proactive in preparing antiracist and social justice teachers to work in the diverse classrooms of today and the future.

Implications For Researchers: Valuing the Power of Stories

In his poem “I am not Sufficiently Obscure”, poet Ray Durem (1962) challenged poets of the time to tell the truth and use their poetry as he did, to fight injustice. He wrote, “I cannot find those mild and gracious words to clothe the carnage” (line 4–5). Although not naive to race(ism) when I began this study, I had no understanding of how nuanced and difficult the work would be or how hard it would be to capture the process and tell the stories of antiracist English teachers in an honest but hopeful way. I call on other practitioner researchers and education researchers to turn their focus to issues of race(ism) and inequities in schools in a way that gives a full picture of the lives of students and teachers using their own stories. This research can be used to support teachers who are attempting antiracist work in their classrooms.

When I set out to study the lived experience of antiracist English teachers from a variety of contexts, I had no idea where the journey would take me. Like Steinbeck (1936) who attempted to capture history and to portray the plight of migrant farm workers in an honest way when writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, I found myself carefully choosing my words, because to write about race is uncomfortable but necessary to bring attention to the ways teachers of different identities and from different contexts can become antiracist English teachers. To do this research I relied heavily on the critical stories of my collaborators. Brayboy et al. (2011)

confirmed, “Stories constitute legitimate sources of data and justifiable ways of coming to know and understand that data” (quoted in Watanabe, 2014, p. 153). Stories are powerful but they must be told properly. In *The Danger of a Single Story*, Adichie (2009) cautioned the audience to refuse secondly, which means to give full stories and reject those stories that do not start at the beginning (Neville, 2020). Full and honest stories can help teachers examine their beliefs and work toward being antiracist.

As a feminist researcher the entire purpose of my research was to bring about change (Leavy & Harris, 2019). Though I am certainly not the only researcher who is calling for a focus on antiracism in research, Noltemeyer and Grapin (2021) vowed, “To prioritize anti-racism, social justice, and equity in our journals’ practices and publications” (p. 8). I wrote in my research journal, “The question they [AERA] are asking is really making me think. How do so many aspects of education research, policy, and practice omit examinations of race and racism? I mean yeah, good question” (Journal 7/28/23, p. 63). A focus on antiracism is needed in all aspects of research from methodology to findings. A rich way to realize that focus is to use storytelling that leads to liberation. Watanabe (2014) argued, “Now is the time to experience socio acupuncture in theory, methodology, and method, and to critically story toward healing and liberatory change” (p. 166). Research focused on the lived experiences of teachers and students within and across contexts using their stories in their own words has the potential to motivate action and bring about change. This work can inspire and support teachers to take antiracist actions in their classrooms and beyond.

Hopeful Thoughts: Continuing to Journey

We are living in contentious times, to continue to work against racism and oppression there needs to be hope because simply put giving up is not an option. (English) teachers will

need to collaborate (Cochran Smith & Lytle, 2021; Oyler, 2017; Picower, 2021; Winn, 2013) and to be activists (de los Rios et al., 2020; Johnson, 2018; Kinloch & Dixon, 2017; Simon, 2015; Tejada et al., 2003). In this capacity, teachers may have to take risks and are encouraged by today's education scholars to follow the example of the abolitionist teachers of the past and continue their work to bring about change (Davis et al., 2022; Givens, 2021; Love, 2019; Ohito, 2019). Teachers have always found ways to work within the cracks to improve the life chances for their students. English teachers are working in classrooms that can be places of oppression, but they can also be places of liberation and liberation is a worthy cause.

We cannot wait for another moment, another murder, another detrimental bill to pass, or until 2042 in order to take action. Racism does not benefit anyone and causes great harm to many (Singh, 2019). Potential harm should be enough of a motivator to take action now and antiracism is not the work of teachers alone. Antiracist work is the responsibility of all people who work in and around schools, teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and education researchers. These are not words of accusation; they are words of encouragement. Antiracist work should be hopeful, an imagining of what the world and schools could be like if we have "the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live, in our schools" (Greene, 1995, p. 5).

On the morning of September 11, 2023, I was physically standing in the same spot I had been standing in as a first year teacher in 2001. At that moment in time, I remember that I was ready to begin my journey, with no idea where the road would take me. As I come to the conclusion of this study of English teachers attempting to become antiracist, I find myself experiencing the feelings of a beginning instead of an ending. Beginnings of journeys are marked by hope and excitement for what is to come, there is also some fear and trepidation for the

unknown, and all journeys necessitate the traveler to pack or prepare for the road ahead. How can one prepare for a journey with no destination? How can one maintain hope and commitment and not be sidetracked by fears, real or imagined? There is no one correct answer to these questions, just as there is not one correct or complete way to be antiracist. Being an antiracist English teacher and a teacher for social justice requires a continuous process of becoming. Michelle Obama encouraged, “To reach continually to a better self” (quoted in Falter et al., 2020, p. 18). It is my hope that sharing the experiences and critical storytelling of this small but mighty teacher inquiry circle will encourage others to answer the call and take up social justice actions in their own classrooms and contexts but not alone. My collaborators and I progressed on our individual and collective journeys alongside one another, taking strength and support from our collaboration, but we have not arrived. There is much more journeying to be done.

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